Understanding Widening Participation in Northern Ireland

Final report

September 2022

CFE research

Report authors:

Dr Sarah Tazzyman

Lindsey Bowes

Alex Stutz

Dr Guy Birkin

Louise Peck

Established in 1997, CFE is an independent not-for-profit company specialising in research and evaluation in education, wellbeing and the economy.

Contents

Abbreviations and glossary

APP	Access and Participation Plan
CIAG	Careers information, advice and guidance
CoWA	Commission on Widening Access
CPD	Continuing professional development
DSA	Disabled students' allowance
FEC(s)	Further education college(s)
FSME	Free school meals entitlement
GB	Great Britain
Grey literature	Information produced outside traditional academic publishing and distribution channels
HE	Higher education
HE-in-FE	Higher education provided in further education colleges
HEI(s)	Higher education institution(s)
HE providers	Providers of higher education, including both HE-in-FE and HEIs
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HLA(s)	Higher level apprenticeship(s)
IAG	Information, advice and guidance
IMD	Index of Multiple Deprivation, including the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) and Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD)
KPM	Key performance measure
MaSN	Maximum student number
MDM	Multiple deprivation measure
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
NI	Northern Ireland
NIMDM	Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (equivalent to IMD, SIMD and WIMD)
OFFA	Office for Fair Access

OfS	Office for Students
POLAR4	'Participation of local areas': Classifies local areas into five quintiles according to the young participation rate in HE, using Middle-Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) for England and Wales, Intermediate Zones for Scotland, and Super Output Areas for NI (second-level statistical building block).
REA	Rapid evidence assessment
RoI	Republic of Ireland
SHEP	Schools Higher Education Partnership, Scotland
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths
TASO	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education – an affiliate What Works Centre
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
WAPP	Widening Access and Participation Plan
WP	Widening participation

Executive summary

This independent report for the Department for the Economy (the Department) reviews the progress that has been made towards achieving the vision set out in *Access to Success*.[1] It explores how the higher education (HE) landscape and widening participation (WP) practice has evolved over the last 10 years, the extent to which access and participation of under-represented groups has increased, and effective ways to address prevailing barriers to HE. Insights from the analysis inform recommendations to help shape a future approach for WP in Northern Ireland (NI).

Context for the review

In 2012, *Graduating to Success*[2] set out a clear role for the HE sector in achieving economic growth and investment in NI. The strategy was soon followed by *Access to Success*, which proposed a programme for WP in HE. While acknowledging that participation rates in NI compared favourably to other parts of the United Kingdom (UK), the strategy identified "stubborn pockets of under-representation" for specific groups. A series of actions were set out to strengthen the WP offer, including:

- the development of a regional awareness programme to increase the profile of HE and the relevance of higher-level skills, among under-represented communities and in the workplace;
- additional funding to support the expansion of the range of aspiration- and attainment-raising programmes available;
- a target to increase the total number of enrolments on Foundation Degrees to 2,500 by 2015;
- encouragement for HE providers to develop regional programmes for alternative routes to HE.

Ten years on, the HE landscape across the UK has evolved. Differential fees and student number control policies are now in place in each jurisdiction and changes to WP funding have been introduced. The Department is, therefore, seeking to review its approach, to ensure that progress towards NI's WP objectives continues into the future.

Research aims and objectives

The Department commissioned CFE to undertake independent research to assess the progress that has made regarding the objectives set out in *Access to Success* over the last decade. We developed a mixed-methods approach to address the research objectives. This involved desk research, secondary data analysis, and primary
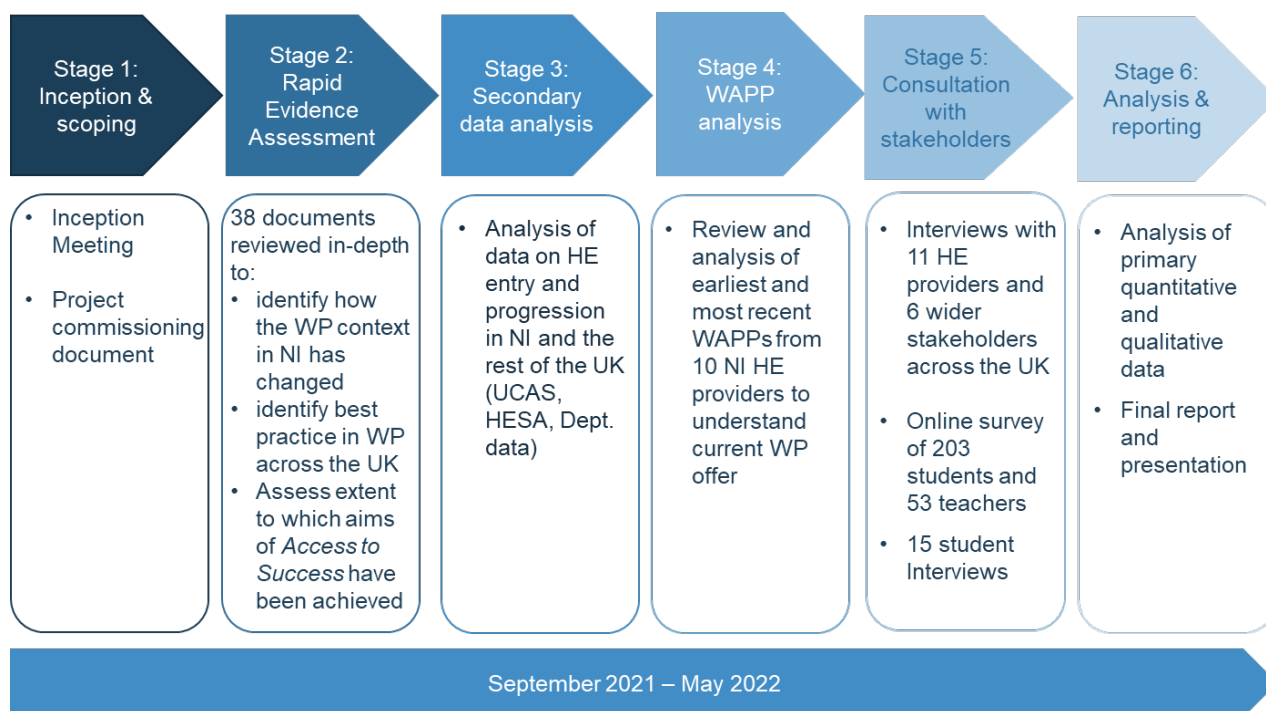
---

[1] Department for Employment and Learning (2012). *Access to Success: An integrated regional strategy for widening participation in higher education*.

[2] Department for Employment and Learning (2012). *Graduating to Success: A higher education strategy for Northern Ireland*.

research with students, teachers, HE providers and wider stakeholders, as summarised in the figure below.

Evaluation approach[3]

Stage 1: Inception & scoping	Stage 2: Rapid Evidence Assessment	Stage 3: Secondary data analysis	Stage 4: WAPP analysis	Stage 5: Consultation with stakeholders	Stage 6: Analysis & reporting
• Inception Meeting • Project commissioning document	38 documents reviewed in-depth to: • identify how the WP context in NI has changed • identify best practice in WP across the UK • Assess extent to which aims of *Access to Success* have been achieved	• Analysis of data on HE entry and progression in NI and the rest of the UK (UCAS, HESA, Dept. data)	• Review and analysis of earliest and most recent WAPPs from 10 NI HE providers to understand current WP offer	• Interviews with 11 HE providers and 6 wider stakeholders across the UK • Online survey of 203 students and 53 teachers • 15 student Interviews	• Analysis of primary quantitative and qualitative data • Final report and presentation

September 2021 – May 2022

Key findings

Widening access to HE

Many of the barriers to accessing HE are similar in NI to the rest of the UK. However, access for those living in rural areas and low levels of attainment are particular issues in the NI context. The number of applicants to HE have increased over the last decade, but gaps prevail:

- Applicants to HE in NI have increased by approximately one-third.[4] The majority of applicants are NI-domiciled students, although the proportion of applicants from England has doubled.
- The number of applicants from NI-domiciled students to HE providers in Great Britain (GB) has increased by approximately 20%. However, most Northern Irish students choose to study in NI rather than in other parts of the UK.
- Participation gaps have decreased for mature learners and those self-reporting a disability in NI overall. However, the gap between males and females has

---

[3] There are 11 HE providers funded by the Department for the Economy in NI. However, the Open University is not required to produce a WAPP as it does not charge higher-level tuition fees.
[4] This refers to the total number of those undergraduate students applying to HEIs and HE-in-FE in NI.

widened and Protestants are still somewhat less likely to progress to HE than Roman Catholics.

- Individual HE providers are partially meeting their benchmarks for specific priority groups. However, targets for MDM Quintile 1, young males in Quintile 1 and adult learners are not always being met and should remain a focus of any future approach.

HE providers are required to set ambitious targets to address the under-representation of priority groups. However, performance against these benchmarks in 2019/20 was mixed. Analysis of HE providers' Widening Access and Participation Plans (WAPPs) shows:

- Both the volume and range of outreach activities delivered by HE providers have increased.
- There is a strong focus on attainment raising. Workshops and summer schools are delivered, alongside tutoring and mentoring, which target pupils as early as primary school.
- HE providers are delivering a range of activities as well as multi-intervention programmes, to improve prospective students' knowledge of HE and raise aspirations. While some target specific groups, most have a broad reach. There is evidence that most activities delivered can positively influence knowledge and awareness of HE and the benefits of higher-level study.
- Contextual admissions have been implemented, to help able students who aspire to study at NI's highest-tariff institution to successfully progress.

In addition:

- An integrated regional awareness raising programme, 'Reach Higher', was successfully rolled out between 2013 and 2016 to promote the benefits of HE participation.
- 'Project 20' has increased awareness of, and subsequent enrolments in, foundation degrees, in order to widen access for work-based learners.
- The introduction of higher level apprenticeships has expanded the range of entry routes into HE.

Retention and progression

Non-continuation rates and the number and proportion of qualifications gained by under-represented groups in HE are impacted by a range of personal, situational and institutional factors. Progression to graduate outcomes can also vary by student characteristics.

- Most HE providers are outperforming their benchmarks for non-continuation set by the Department for both full- and part-time students.
- Non-continuation rates have decreased in NI for both full- and part-time students in the last two years and are lower, based on a seven-year average, than in the UK as a whole.

- While the number and proportion of qualifications achieved by NI-domiciled students have increased, minimal progress has been made in closing this gap for students in MDM Quintile 1 and males.

Insights from the WAPPs show that:

- HE providers have increased their focus on student retention during the lifetime of *Access to Success*. HE providers deliver targeted support for specific groups, alongside programmes that are accessible to all WP students.
- Retention activities provide practical help (including financial aid) and support to enable students to integrate into university life. Mentoring and tutoring help WP students to develop study skills and strategies for coping with the pressures of HE. There is some evidence that these approaches can have a positive impact on both attainment and retention.
- There has been little change over time in the volume and range of activities that support progression. Placements, work experience and support with CV development are the primary mechanisms in place.

There is limited research into the reasons for gaps in progression and success. Gaps in the outcomes achieved by disabled students in NI require further exploration. However, addressing these gaps is likely to require a joined-up approach between HE providers, employers and wider stakeholders.

Financial support

Concerns about the cost of HE and fear of debt can act as barriers to access. Financial hardship can also impact retention, attainment and completion rates. The Department expects HE providers to offer bursaries to eligible students from low-income households, equating to at least 10% of their course tuition fees. In addition to the bursary, HE providers offer a range of financial support, including scholarships and grants for specific items such as IT equipment. Existing evidence on the impact of financial support suggests that it has a greater influence on retention rates than on access to HE.

Monitoring and evaluating WP activity

WAPPs are designed to ensure HE providers adopt a strategic and ambitious approach to WP. They are collected annually to assess HE providers' WP delivery and include monitoring data for a three-year period as well as plans for future activity. Access and Participation Plans (APP) constitute the equivalent process in England. HE providers are required to outline their ambitions and strategies for WP over a five-year period, set against the Office for Students' (OfS) key performance measures. HE providers are also expected to submit an evaluation strategy and provide evidence to demonstrate the impact of their activities.

The WAPPs have enhanced the monitoring of WP activity and the associated expenditure. However, HE providers perceive them as burdensome and time-consuming to complete. A revised process would help to simplify and streamline the

WAPP and enhance the quality and consistency of the data. Although no explicit objectives were set, *Access to Success* set out an ambition to build evaluation capacity and develop an evidence base on effective practice in WP in NI. However, analysis demonstrates that a minority of HE providers invest a small proportion of their additional fee income in WP research. Furthermore, there is little evidence that HE providers carry out evaluation to assess the impact of their WP offer at present.

Overall, our research finds that most of the key actions set out in *Access to Success* have been at least partially met at the national level (see the table below).

Performance against key actions in *Access to Success*

Key actions	Progress
1: Longitudinal study of educational attainment to identify patterns of disadvantage when applying to HE	Ongoing
2: Review of data pertaining to access to and participation in HE	Met
3: Identification of WP students based on multiple disadvantages and including an assessment of individual needs	Partially met
4: Single integrated regional awareness-raising programme	Met
5: Expansion of aspiration- and attainment-raising programmes at school, college, community and the workplace	Partially met
6: Increased enrolments in Foundation Degrees	Met
7: Encouragement of regional programmes for a standardised route of exceptional application to HE	Partially met
8: Attendance monitoring of all students in receipt of WP support	Met
9: HE institutions to develop additional support measures for students to sustain continuing participation	Partially met
10: Philanthropic bursary/scholarship programmes	Partially met
11: Introduction of Widening Access and Participation Plan	Met

Towards the development of a future approach

Drawing on insights from this research, we have identified seven strategic priorities to inform a future approach to WP in Northern Ireland:

1) **Take account of the intersections between student characteristics to identify priority target groups for WP**, and to ensure that interventions address the specific barriers to HE experienced by these groups, including low prior attainment. Addressing gaps in national administrative data should be a key priority to facilitate this process.

2) **Set national targets** to address under-representation of identified priority groups. Develop associated key performance indicators against which progress towards the long-term goals can be measured at a national and provider level.

3) **Require HE providers to set more ambitious targets** to address gaps in access, retention and progression, in relation to national key performance indicators. Consider mechanisms to encourage HE providers to work collaboratively to address 'cold spots' in WP provision and reduce duplication.

4) **Consider a revised WAPP process focused on outcomes rather than being inputs based**. Monitor progress by capturing consistent and comprehensive data from all HE providers about the number and characteristics of participants in WP, the specific types of activities delivered at each stage in the lifecycle, and the associated expenditure. Consider the benefits of receiving WAPP submissions on a three- or five-year cycle with risk-based monitoring to reduce the burden.

5) **Develop a more robust evidence base on 'what works' in a NI context**. Consider devising a common set of outcome measures to assess the impact of WP activities and interventions at both a national and local level. Build evaluation capacity through training and collaboration between HE providers, and ensure that HE providers allocate an appropriate proportion of their WP budgets to research and evaluation. Require HE providers to submit evidence about the impact of their work through the annual WAPP monitoring process.

6) **Increase access to HE in rural areas and the range of courses available in NI**, to reduce migration amongst 'reluctant' and 'determined' leavers and retain more graduate talent with higher-level skills, in support of wider skills policy objectives.

7) **Establish a collaborative forum** to achieve economies of scale, maximise value for money, minimise duplication and to better co-ordinate WP activities across all relevant stakeholders, including HE providers, government departments and bodies representing WP target groups.

01. Introduction

This independent report for the Department for the Economy (the Department) reviews the progress that has been made towards achieving the vision set out in Northern Ireland's (NI) first strategy for widening participation (WP) in higher education (HE), *Access to Success*.[5] It explores how the HE landscape and WP practice has evolved over the last 10 years; the extent to which the participation rate of the groups identified in the strategy has increased; and the prevailing barriers to HE for those groups who are, or remain, under-represented, and effective ways to address them. Insights from the analysis inform a series of recommendations to help shape a future approach to access and participation in NI.

Context

In 2012, *Graduating to Success*[6] set out a clear role for HE in achieving economic growth and supporting social inclusion in NI. *Access to Success* was published shortly afterwards, following a public consultation, which proposed a programme for WP in HE. While acknowledging that participation rates in NI compared favourably to other parts of the UK, the strategy identified "stubborn pockets of under-representation" amongst students from low participation/high deprivation neighbourhoods,[7] including young Protestant males and adults; in particular, work-based learners.

Since 2013, HE providers have been required to develop WP strategies, most recently in the form of the Widening Access and Participation Plans (WAPPs). WAPPs set out HE providers' WP targets, along with details of the activities they will deliver and the associated expenditure, over a three-year period. The introduction of this process demonstrates the Department's desire to strengthen the processes for monitoring progress towards WP targets and goals, at the level of the HE provider and across the sector as a whole.

During the decade since *Access to Success* was launched, there have been significant changes to the HE landscape in each of the UK's jurisdictions. Differential fees and policies on student number controls are now in place in each nation, and changes to WP funding have been introduced, all of which have potential implications for the access and participation of under-represented groups. It is, therefore, timely to review the progress that has been made towards achieving the strategy's objectives, to ensure that, going forward, NI's HE system continues to help learners from diverse background to achieve positive outcomes.

---

[5] Department for Employment and Learning (2012). *Access to Success: An integrated regional strategy for widening participation in higher education*.

[6] Department for Employment and Learning (2012). *Graduating to Success: A higher education strategy for Northern Ireland*.
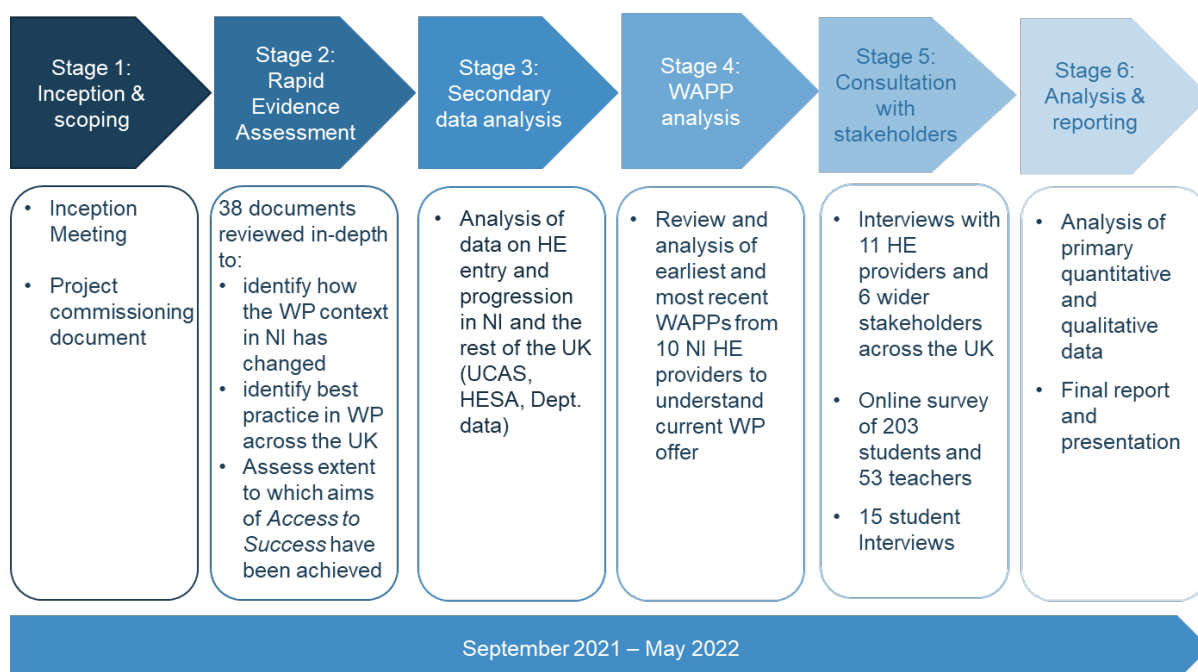
[7] *Access to Success*, page 6.

Research aims and objectives

To understand the progress that has been made towards the vision and objectives set out in *Access to Success*, the Department commissioned CFE to undertake independent research to explore how the WP context in NI has changed since the strategy was launched, and to assess whether the actions within it were taken forward and delivered. To achieve this aim, the research sought to benchmark NI's progress in relation to WP with the other jurisdictions of the UK, and identify best practice that could be implemented in NI to further advance opportunities in HE for under-represented and disadvantaged groups. The purpose was to identify insights that could inform a series of recommendations to help shape a future approach for WP in NI.

Approach

We addressed the research objectives through a mixed-methods approach summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Evaluation approach [8]

Stage 1: Inception & scoping	Stage 2: Rapid Evidence Assessment	Stage 3: Secondary data analysis	Stage 4: WAPP analysis	Stage 5: Consultation with stakeholders	Stage 6: Analysis & reporting
• Inception Meeting • Project commissioning document	38 documents reviewed in-depth to: • identify how the WP context in NI has changed • identify best practice in WP across the UK • Assess extent to which aims of *Access to Success* have been achieved	• Analysis of data on HE entry and progression in NI and the rest of the UK (UCAS, HESA, Dept. data)	• Review and analysis of earliest and most recent WAPPs from 10 NI HE providers to understand current WP offer	• Interviews with 11 HE providers and 6 wider stakeholders across the UK • Online survey of 203 students and 53 teachers • 15 student Interviews	• Analysis of primary quantitative and qualitative data • Final report and presentation

September 2021 – May 2022

Rapid evidence assessment

To locate the research in context, we conducted a desk-based review of WP policy and existing research literature, using a rapid evidence assessment (REA) approach. This approach is designed to provide a similar degree of rigour to a systematic literature

---

[8] There are 11 HE providers funded by the Department for the Economy in NI. However, the Open University is not required to produce a WAPP as it does not charge higher-level tuition fees.

review, but by tightly defining the review parameters, the process can be accelerated in order to be completed more quickly and within a more limited budget.

We prioritised academic and grey literature sources from the UK, published between 2009 and 2021. We identified material through Google Scholar and targeted websites; we also 'hand searched' the bibliographies of relevant material, for additional relevant sources that were not identified through other search strategies.

In total, we identified 85 sources for further screening: 39 academic articles, and 46 reports in the grey literature, which included some of CFE's outputs in this field. These sources were inputted into a database. We screened the material by title and abstract (or introduction, as appropriate) and mapped it against the primary research questions. This process identified 38 of the most relevant sources for detailed review.

WAPP analysis

WAPPs are submitted annually and comprise four parts: Part 1 contains a three-year plan, including a narrative of an institution's WP policy and how it links to its wider strategy; Part 2 presents the institution's forward plan for WP; Part 3 comprises a monitoring report on the progress made towards the objectives set out in the plan from two years previous; and Part 4 includes validation by senior management and commentary from the Student Union. It is important to note that WAPPs do not currently capture all the WP activity undertaken or measure its outcomes.

Our analysis focuses on Part 1 and Part 3 of the WAPP documentation and compares the data in the earliest and most recent versions available, which varied by HE provider. Table 1 overleaf outlines the submission dates of the earliest and most recent WAPP documentation for each HE provider. We coded HE providers' spending against targets, to calculate percentage change over time and identify spending priorities. We then conducted a review of the access, retention and success interventions delivered by HE providers for different target groups, to understand the extent to which the offer had evolved over time. The analysis provides insights into the extent to which the actions set out in *Access to Success* have been achieved.

Secondary data analysis

We undertook secondary analysis of data relating to WP in NI, acquired from a range of sources between October 2021 and May 2022.[9] The Department was a primary source of data on participation by key demographic groups (including students classified in terms of deprivation, disability, gender, ethnicity and religion). The analysis also draws on UCAS and HESA data on applicants and enrolments. Additionally, to understand how the performance of NI HE providers compares with

---

[9] The majority of data analysis was completed between October 2021 and March 2022 when the initial draft final report was submitted. Some data sources have been replaced and some data have been updated since the report was drafted.

England, Scotland and Wales, we also used equivalent data available from the Office for Students (OfS), Scottish Funding Council (SFC), and Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). We analysed the data to understand trends in HE access and participation over the 10 years since *Access to Success* was published.

Table 1: Submission dates for the earliest and most recent WAPPS included in the review.

Institution name	Earliest		Latest (Part 1 & 3)
	Part 1	Part 3	
Queen's University Belfast	2014/15	2018/19	2021/22
St Mary's University College	2016/17	2016/17	2021/22
Stranmillis University College	2016/17	2015/16	2021/22
Ulster University	2014/15	2012/13	2021/22
Open University	2014/15	n/a	2021/22
Belfast Metropolitan College	2016/17	2015/16	2021/22
Northern Regional College	2014/15	2015/16	2021/22
North West Regional College	2014/15	2017/18	2021/22
Southern Regional College	2014/15	2015/16	2021/22
South Eastern Regional College	2014/15	2016/17	2021/22
South West College	2016/17	2013/14	2021/22

Consultation with stakeholders

Student and teacher consultation

CFE designed an online survey, which the Department for Education distributed to teachers in all schools in NI that offer Level 3 education. The survey was intended to explore teachers' perceptions of the barriers and enablers to progression into HE and what works to increase students' knowledge and aspirations. A total of 53 teachers responded to the survey, with most respondents working in high schools (81%). Different roles are represented in the sample, but classroom teachers (32%) and heads of department (26%) are the largest groups. No colleges participated in the survey.

We invited teachers to share a similar online survey with their students, to explore their views of HE and the WP activities they have engaged in. The survey included a recall question which invited students to take part in an interview to discuss their

attitudes and intentions towards HE in more depth. A total of 203 students responded to the survey. While the sample obtained provides good coverage of students from under-represented backgrounds (52% eligible for FSME; 56% from Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) deciles 1–4), it is skewed towards those who attend high schools (88%) and are Christian Catholic (72%). Only a minority of respondents describe themselves as Christian Protestant (4%).

The samples achieved for both the teacher and student surveys are not therefore representative of the populations as a whole (see Appendix 1 for a more detailed breakdown of the student and teacher sample characteristics). To minimise the risk of drawing biased conclusions that do not reflect the breadth of student and staff perceptions, the findings from the surveys are not included in this report. Insights from 15 student interviews are, however, included, to help substantiate findings from the desk-based research at relevant points in the report.

HE providers and wider stakeholders

To capture the voice of HE providers, we conducted interviews with stakeholders who have responsibility for WP activities across all 11 HE providers. Interviews were designed to capture views on the impact of *Access to Success*, and to explore the ways in which institutions are implementing WP approaches.

To complement these, we undertook six additional interviews with a range of wider stakeholders involved in HE in the UK. These were designed to understand the WP context in the other jurisdictions, and the progress made towards national targets and goals. A full list of stakeholder organisations can be found in Appendix 3.

02. WP policy landscape in the UK

The first HE strategy for Northern Ireland, *Graduating to Success*, was published in 2012. The policy vision was to achieve the twin goals of economic prosperity and social justice by developing a HE sector that is "vibrant and of international calibre; pursues excellence in teaching and research; plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable, knowledge-based economy; supports a confident, shared society; and recognises and values diversity." [10] The strategy emphasises the importance of WP, highlighting the need for the HE sector to:

- become more accessible to groups who are traditionally under-represented;
- offer more flexible lifelong learning environments.

The accompanying strategy for WP, *Access to Success*,[11] was published the same year to help deliver the vision for the HE sector. It set out a series of actions designed to strengthen the WP offer, including:

- the development of a regional awareness programme to increase the profile of HE and the relevance of higher-level skills among under-represented communities, and in the workplace;

- additional funding to support expansion of the range of aspiration- and attainment-raising programmes available;

- a target to increase the total number of enrolments in Foundation Degrees to 2,500 by 2015;

- encouragement for HE providers to develop regional programmes for alternative routes to HE.

The objectives of *Access to Success* tie in with wider goals to improve productivity and reduce social inequality in NI, set out in the latest *Skills Strategy*.[12] The *Skills Strategy* identifies evidence of a "low skills equilibrium" in NI, linked to low wages, low productivity and low levels of in-work progression. At the time *Access to Success* was launched, 29% of the NI working-age population was qualified to level 4 or above. The proportion of the working-age population with a degree was 34% in the Republic of Ireland (RoI),[11] 37% in England, 41% in Scotland and 33% in Wales 33%.[13] More recent data indicates that the proportion of the working-age population in NI with higher level qualifications is on an upward trajectory, but is still lower than the rest of the UK.[14] Previous evidence suggests that around 64% of those who

---

[10] *Graduating to Success*, page 3.

[11] *Access to Success*.

[12] Department for the Economy (2021). *A Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland – Skills for a 10x Economy*.

[13] https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/graduatesintheuklabourmarketreferencetables

[14] https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/Qualifications-in-northern-ireland-2020.pdf

migrate from NI to study HE in GB do not return to work in NI,[15] whereas 95% of those who graduate from a Northern Irish HE provider remain in NI.[16]

Widening access to HE for more people from a more diverse range of backgrounds and increasing opportunities for graduates – both non-NI-domiciled and NI-domiciled – to deploy their higher-level skills in NI, will help to achieve the *Skills Strategy*'s objectives. Specifically, it will ensure that more young people and adults in the workforce develop higher-level skills and obtain the qualifications necessary to address the forecast shortages, in order to drive efficiency, productivity and economic growth in the post-Covid-19 and post-Brexit era.[17]

Delivering the vision for WP in NI

The vision for HE in Northern Ireland is that "any qualified individual in NI should be able to gain access to HE, irrespective of their personal or social background".[18] At the time this vision was set, HE participation in NI compared favourably with the other UK nations. Data from 2010/11 demonstrates that 39.4% of NI's young full-time first-degree entrants were from socio-economic classes 4–7, compared with the UK average of 30.6%.[19] Furthermore, in 2009/10, more than two-fifths (42%) of school leavers intended to progress directly to HE.[20] Despite NI's advantageous position, the strategy called for specific targeting of the "most able but least likely" students, in order to address gaps in progression among under-represented groups.[21]

The main target for WP in NI (which is common to all parts of the UK) is to achieve equality of access to HE between the least and most economically deprived groups. These groups are defined in terms of aggregated multiple deprivation measures, with specific variants for each country.[22] In NI, students from Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) Quintile 1 (Q1) areas were initially identified as a key priority group. Three years into the strategy, data analysis for the Equality Commission for NI[23] identified a range of characteristics, in addition to GCSE attainment, that were associated with inequalities in education in NI. Mirroring wider research,[24] the report also highlighted the importance of recognising how the intersectionality between students' characteristics, such as gender and religion, affects their attainment and

---

[15] PIVOTAL (2021). *Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland*.

[16] HESA (2021). UK domiciled graduates entering work in the UK by region of domicile, region of provider and region of work 2019/20. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sb263/figure-15

[17] Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2019). *Northern Ireland Skills Barometer: 2019 update*.

[18] *Access to Success*, page 5.

[19] This data does not take into account the distribution of the different socio-economic classes within the wider population when making this comparison. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/summary/2010-11

[20] This data is based on the School Leavers Survey, which measures (unverified) destinations reported to schools by school leavers. https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-leavers-200910-statistical-bulletin

[21] *Access to Success*.

[22] England – Index of Multiple Deprivation; Scotland – Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation; Wales – Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation.

[23] Burns, S. et al. (2015). *Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland*. Queen's University Belfast.

[24] Early, E., Miller, S., & Dunne, L. (2021). *The influence of a pupil's socio-economic profile and school factors on GCSE attainment outcomes*. Administrative Data Research Centre Northern Ireland (ADRC NI).

progression to HE. It recommended that expanding WP activity to more young people will help to overcome the specific barriers faced by certain sub-groups.[25] The target groups were subsequently identified as: students with a disability (self-declared; recipients of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA)); young males from MDM Q1 areas; adults (aged 25+, particularly those in the workforce without tertiary-level qualifications), and care-experienced young people; along with those living in rural areas.

According to the latest analysis, a quarter of NI-domiciled students study at HEIs in the other UK jurisdictions; particularly in the north-west of England, and Scotland.[26] Two categories of educational migrant are identified in the literature: 'determined' and 'reluctant' leavers.[27] 'Determined leavers' typically attend highly selective universities and reflect a demographic of young people who wish to leave NI for their personal or career development. 'Reluctant leavers' would like to study in NI but are 'forced' to leave because of a lack of suitable HE provision, given their level of attainment and/or subject choices (for example, there is no provision for veterinary science in NI).[28] Although the aim of *Access to Success* was to widen access to HE *in general* for under-represented groups, there was a desire to incentivise even more NI-domiciled students, including under-represented groups, to study HE in NI.

Expenditure on WP activities

Additional fee income is the primary source of funding for WP activities in NI. Since tuition fees were introduced in 2006, HE providers in NI that charge more than the basic fee have been expected to spend a proportion of their additional fee income on WP, initially, at a rate of between 20% and 30%. During 2011/12 and 2013/14, average spend on WP per HE provider was approximately 30%.[29] In 2015, the minimum required spend was reduced to 10% of additional fee income. However, performance targets were not altered, so any reductions in spending at the provider level were expected to be achieved through efficiency savings.[30]

The HE sector in NI in receipt of funding from the Department for the Economy comprises four campus-based universities, the Open University and six regional colleges[31]. The course profile and entry requirements for each of these HE providers, along with the size and characteristics of their student populations, vary considerably. Consequently, the resource available for WP, the level of WP

---

[25] Burns, S. et al. (2015). *Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland*. Queen's University Belfast.

[26] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency / Department for the Economy (2022). *Enrolments at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis 2020/21*.

[27] OECD (2012). *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*.

[28] PIVOTAL (2021). *Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland*.

[29] In 2011/12, average spend was 30.7% of additional fee income; in 2013/14 it was 29.2%. Department for Employment and Learning (2012). *Access to Success – An integrated regional strategy for widening participation in higher education*.

[30] Other sources of funding have been made available for institutions through a range of different sources – including the 'Widening Participation Premium', to target students in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance; and a range of designated projects accessible via competitive bidding.

[31] HE provision is also available at CAFRE, which sits within the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Enterprise.

expenditure and the specific priorities and benchmarks for WP also vary. According to the 2021/22 WAPPs, the total amount spent by NI's HE providers on all WP activities was £8,075,571. On average, providers spent 19% of their additional fee income on WP activities.[32]

HE providers apportion additional fee income to activities aimed at widening access, and to improve the retention and progression of under-represented groups. The level of expenditure on WP activities at each stage has fluctuated over time and in response to changes in the volume, range and balance of activities delivered. The level of resources dedicated to activities at each of these stages in the lifecycle is determined by institutional priorities for WP, as detailed in their WAPPs. During the period since *Access to Success* was launched, the volume of activity for both widening access and retention in HE has increased, but activity to support the progression of under-represented groups appears to have remained static (Figure 2).[33]

Figure 2: Comparison of the number of activities offered by HE providers to support access, retention and progression, between the earliest and latest WAPPs.
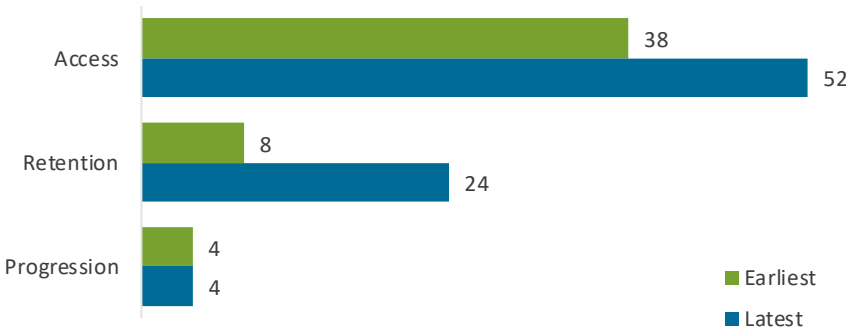
Further details of the current offer – including evidence of the effectiveness of different activities, and how the current offer could be strengthened to overcome ongoing barriers to access, retention and success – are provided in the following chapters: Chapter 3: Outreach, Chapter 4: Retention, achievement and progression, and Chapter 5: Financial support.

WP policy in Great Britain

In order to deliver their respective visions, each nation is implementing a strategy with identified priorities for WP. The overarching vision for WP set out in *Access to Success* is in line with the visions developed and implemented in the other

---

[32] Range: 11% to 34% of additional fee income.

[33] Any figures provided about interventions offered are an estimate. It is not possible to provide accurate figures about the number and types of interventions offered because of the way information is recorded in WAPPs. Providers are asked to outline details of up to 10 interventions. We have assumed that the interventions included are most likely to be the 'flagship' activities, high volume/cost activities, and/or the most effective interventions.

jurisdictions of the UK over a similar period of time.[34] Although some priorities respond to specific challenges in a particular country, most are common to all:

- raise awareness and aspiration towards HE: "HE is for everyone who is able";
- raise attainment amongst under-represented groups;
- improve progression pathways into and through HE (e.g. access courses, articulation routes);
- increase flexible learning opportunities, including part-time study, workplace learning and technology-enhanced learning;
- increase investment in effective outreach in schools, communities and workplaces;
- promote fair admissions;
- widen participation in STEM subjects;
- deliver financial support packages;
- develop personalised support for WP groups (pre- and post-entry);
- improve monitoring of WP activities and research and evaluation (including reporting outcomes and evidence of effective practice/impact);
- advocate the role of WP in supporting the post-Covid-19 recovery.

Delivering the vision for WP across GB

Scotland

The Scottish Government's 2014/15 Programme for Government established the Commission for Widening Access (CoWA), which published its strategy, *A Blueprint for Fairness*, in 2016.[35] The vision set out in this strategy is that "a child born in one of Scotland's most deprived communities should, by the time of leaving school, have the same chance of going to university as one born in one of the country's least deprived areas." The Scottish Government set a national target to measure progress towards achieving this vision, stating that "by 2030, 20% of entrants to HE should come from the 20% most deprived communities in Scotland".[36] To support the achievement of this goal, interim targets were also set: 16% of new entrants to full-time first-degree courses should come from the 20% most deprived communities in Scotland by 2021, and 18% by 2026.[37] To ensure equality of opportunity for students from the most deprived backgrounds across the HE sector in Scotland, the government set a further target that by 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10% of full-time first-degree entrants to every

---

[34] Policy documents consulted during the production of Table 3 span a period of approximately 10 years and do not necessarily reflect progress made in addressing these challenges since their publication.
[35] Commission on Widening Access (2016). *A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report on the Commission for Widening Access*.
[36] *A Blueprint for Fairness*.
[37] Commissioner for Fair Access (2022). *Maintaining the Momentum Towards Fair Access*.

individual Scottish university. [38] This particular target is due to be reviewed in 2022, and higher targets for subsequent years are likely to be considered.

Students living in the most deprived neighbourhoods, therefore, provide the primary focus for Scotland's WP strategy. However, it also aims to widen access and improve the retention and success of care leavers, who are also identified as a priority target group. Other areas of concern that are *not* currently subject to targets are:

- the additional barriers faced by people with protected characteristics, as well as carers, former offenders, and young people leaving the armed forces;

- widening access to high-demand degree subjects (e.g. medicine) and part-time study;

- improving access to HE for those living in rural and remote areas;

- improving graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students, including progression to postgraduate study. [39]

England

Around the time that *Access to Success* was launched, the vision for HE in England was that "everyone with the potential to benefit from HE should have equal opportunity to participate and succeed on a course and in an institution that best fits their potential, needs and ambitions for employment or further study". [40] The Office for Students was subsequently established in 2018 as the new regulator for the HE sector in England. Replacing the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), the OfS assumed responsibility for delivering the Conservative Government's objectives for WP, initially set out in the social mobility action plan. [41] Currently, one of the OfS's three strategic objectives is that "all students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education". To achieve this aim, the OfS is working to ensure that "students' access, success and progression are not limited by their background, location or characteristics", and that "prospective students can choose from a diverse range of courses and providers at any stage of their life, with a wide range of flexible and innovative opportunities". [42]

HE providers in England that wish to charge higher-level tuition fees must set out the activities they will deliver to improve equality of opportunity for under-represented groups in an access and participation plan (APP), funded by additional fee income. Under-represented groups are defined by the OfS as:

---

[38] Commission on Widening Access (2016). *Technical paper on measures and targets*.
[39] *A Blueprint for Fairness*, page 69.
[40] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014). *National strategy for access and student success in higher education*.
[41] Department for Education (2017). *Unlocking talent, fulfilling potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education*.
[42] OfS strategy.

- students from areas of low HE participation, low household income or low socio-economic status;
- some black, Asian and minority ethnic students;
- mature students;
- disabled students;
- care leavers;
- carers;
- people estranged from their families;
- people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities;
- refugees;
- children from military families.

The latest guidance[43] from the Department for Education outlines its intention to refocus access and participation, to enable the HE sector to fulfil a greater role in raising aspirations and standards in education. This has resulted in an increased emphasis on attainment raising, the types of HE provision students progress to, and graduate outcomes. HE providers are being required to refresh their APPs to address the OfS's new priorities for access and participation,[44] including how they will:

- partner with schools and other local organisations to raise the attainment of young people;
- develop more diverse pathways into and through HE via more flexible courses;
- ensure that access leads to participation in high-quality courses and secures good graduate outcomes;
- improve the quality and volume of evaluation of APP activity;
- make APPs more accessible, so that prospective students, their parents and other stakeholders can easily understand them.

The OfS publishes data at the institutional and sector level on its access and participation data dashboard.[45] It provides four Key Performance Measures (KPMs),[46] designed to reduce gaps in participation, continuation and attainment for specific groups of under-represented students. The most recent targets for England are:

- To eliminate the gap in entry rates at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups by 2038/39.
- To eliminate the unexplained gap in non-continuation between most and least represented groups by 2024/25, and to eliminate the absolute gap by 2030/31.

---

[43] *The future of access and participation* (November 2021).

[44] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/our-approach-to-access-and-participation/

[45] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/

[46] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/analysis-of-app-targets-in-relation-to-ofs-kpms-2022/

- To eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students by 2024/25, and to eliminate the absolute gap by 2030/31.
- To eliminate the gap in degree outcomes between students with and without a disability by 2024/25.

Wales

In Wales, regulatory responsibility for improving equality of opportunity, and for monitoring HEIs' compliance with their Widening Access (WA) strategies, lies with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). HEFCW set out a strategic plan[47] for delivering the Welsh Government's 2013 policy on widening access. Its current priorities for WP reflect many of those in the other jurisdictions; they focus on widening access and supporting the retention and success of those living in the bottom two clusters of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) areas. Like the Department in NI, HEFCW is seeking to promote Wales as the destination of first choice for HE, and to contribute to achieving wider strategic objectives relating to tackling poverty, raising educational aspirations and attainment, and improving social mobility and economic prosperity.[48]

To achieve the Welsh Government's vision for WP, HEFCW set the following targets:

- To increase the proportion of all Welsh-domiciled students studying HE courses and FECs in Wales who are domiciled in the bottom quintile of wards in the WIMD, or in Communities First (CF) cluster areas.
- To increase in the proportion of all UK-domiciled students studying HE courses at HEIs and FECs in Wales who are from UK low-participation areas.
- To decrease the percentage of full-time undergraduate students no longer in HE following their year of entry.
- To decrease the percentage of part-time first-degree students no longer in HE two years after their year of entry.
- The percentage change in the number of part-time students attending HE courses in Welsh HE institutions and FECs to be equal to, or greater than, the comparable figure for the UK.

HEFCW does not prescribe how institutions should deliver against these objectives.[49] However, it supports 'Reaching Wider in 2002/03' – a Wales-wide, collaborative, long-term programme to widen access to HE and higher-level skills – to complement the institutional offer. This programme is delivered by three regional partnerships, comprising all Welsh HE and FE providers, local authorities, employers, schools, the voluntary sector, and Careers Wales. This approach is similar to Uni Connect in

---

[47] https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/en/publications/circulars/w14-32he-strategic-approach-to-widening-access-to-higher-education-2013-14-to-2015-16/

[48] https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/en/our-responsibilities/widening-access/

[49] Evans, C., Rees, G., Taylor, T. & Wright, W. (2019). Widening Access to higher education: the reproduction of university hierarchies through policy enactment. *Journal of Education Policy*, 34(1), 101–116.

England,[50] and the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP)[51] and the North of Scotland Universities Collaborative Project[52] in Scotland.

As in NI, a wide range of interventions, information, advice and guidance (IAG) and financial support are being delivered by HE providers across Great Britain, designed to widen access to HE and improve the retention and success of under-represented groups. The impact of this work, and the progress made towards the respective targets in each of the nations, including NI, are explored in Chapter 6.

---

[50] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/
[51] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/access-inclusion/access-initiatives/shep/schools-higher-education-programme.aspx
[52] https://www.rgu.ac.uk/north-of-scotland-universities-collaborative-project

03. Outreach

Mirroring the landscape in other jurisdictions, outreach in NI comprises interventions to raise attainment, increase knowledge and aspirations, and widen access to HE. This chapter explores the outreach offer since the launch of *Access to Success* [53] and assesses its effectiveness, drawing on evidence from across the UK. Barriers to access, along with the ways in which the current offer could be strengthened to help address them, are also considered, informed by existing literature and the primary research conducted with stakeholders and students.

Summary

- Widening access is central to achieving three key objectives in *Access to Success* and has provided the focus for WP in NI for the past 10 years. Both the volume and range of outreach activities have increased.

- Most HE providers deliver multi-intervention programmes to raise attainment, improve knowledge, and increase aspirations towards HE. While some programmes target specific under-represented groups, most have a broad reach in terms of the characteristics of the students they engage.

- 'Reach Higher' – an integrated regional awareness programme – ran between 2013 and 2016 to promote the benefits of HE. HE providers are building on this campaign by delivering information, advice and guidance (IAG) and campus visits, to ensure students' decisions are well informed.

- There is a strong focus on attainment raising. Workshops and summer schools are delivered alongside tutoring and mentoring, which target pupils as early as primary school. Plans are in place to better enable parents/carers to support their children's development in both literacy and numeracy.

- 'Project 20' has increased awareness of, and subsequent enrolments in, Foundation Degrees in NI, to help widen access for work-based learners.

- Contextual admissions have been implemented, to help able students who aspire to study at NI's highest-tariff institution to successfully progress.

- Prevailing barriers to HE include attainment gaps (particularly among Protestant males from lower socio-economic groups), the cost of HE, and 'cold spots' in provision (including a lack of courses in some subjects, and campuses that are inaccessible to students living in rural areas).

- The introduction of higher level apprenticeships has expanded the range of entry routes into HE. Any consideration of other alternative routes, such as T-Levels and Foundation programmes, should be informed by learning from the other jurisdictions that are implementing them.

---

[53] *Access to Success*.

Widening access is central to the achievement of three of the objectives set out in *Access to Success*: to increase attainment, raise awareness of the benefits of HE, and expand alternative entry routes. According to our analysis of institutional WAPPs (the primary source of information on the extent and nature of the WP offer in NI), the WP offer has evolved since the strategy was launched; however, outreach continues to provide the main focus for much of the activity delivered (see in the previous chapter).

Collectively, HE providers in NI deliver a broad portfolio of interventions. Although much of the activity engages a range of students, some activities are tailored specifically for particular under-represented groups, as well as for parents and teachers. Despite being identified as a priority, activities specifically for students with a disability do not appear to be a core part of the offer; this highlights a potential gap in current provision (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Volume of widening access activities offered by HE providers, by target group.

	Disadvantaged	Disability	Care experienced	Gender	Age	Multi-target group
Multi-intervention				○	○	●
IAG	○		○			●
Summer school	○				○	○
Campus visits	○					○
Mentoring			○			○
Parent activity	○					○
Attainment workshops	○					○
Tutoring	○					○
Subject masterclass						○

Key: ○ 1–5 activities ● 6–10 activities

Multi-intervention approach to widening access

A key ambition of *Access to Success* was to enhance the WP offer in NI, to ensure students could benefit from a coordinated offer of sustained and progressive outreach interventions. This was underpinned by evidence that progressive and sustained activity is more impactful than one-off short-term interventions.

Our WAPP analysis suggests that a high volume of multi-intervention programmes, which deliver a range of activities to cohorts of students over a period of time, are being delivered by institutions. While some target specific under-represented groups, most have a broad reach in terms of the characteristics of the students engaged. For example, Queen's University Belfast's Access and Open Learning Programme includes a suite of activities to increase access to HE, such as taster courses and awareness-raising activities. Its Pathway Opportunity Programme is a further example that delivers a series of structured events, including workshops,

masterclasses and seminars, on campus or via an online virtual learning environment.

There is a strong body of evidence that multi-intervention approaches have a positive impact on learners' knowledge of the HE offer and how to apply, their knowledge of the benefits of HE, and their confidence in their ability to make informed choices.[54] Existing impact evidence is scant for understanding the effectiveness of interventions on longer-term outcomes. Recent evidence, however, shows that multi-interventions do have a positive impact on the number of applications to HE, and findings from a new causal study show that they are also associated with a higher probability of learners being accepted into a HE programme.[55]

Awareness raising

Information, advice and guidance (IAG)

In response to the objective set out in *Access to Success*, a centralised awareness-raising programme, 'Reach Higher', was rolled out in 2013. The programme was coordinated by the Department for the Economy, with input from HE providers, the Department of Education and the Careers Service. The aim was to raise awareness of the benefits of HE participation. To reach as broad an audience as possible, information was shared via multiple channels, including TV and social media. The campaign ceased in 2016 because of financial pressures and a moratorium on advertising expenditure.

IAG remains the most prevalent widening access intervention offered by individual HE providers. Evidence suggests that it can have a small, positive impact on attitudes towards HE and HE participation,[56] particularly when it is tailored to individual needs and integrated into a sustained and progressive outreach programme. Most IAG activity in NI is delivered in primary and post-primary schools. However, more recently, HE providers have broadened the focus of their IAG, which now engages parents and the wider community. For example, at Belfast Metropolitan College, outreach is delivered to community groups in areas with high levels of disadvantage. This includes single-parent groups, transgender support groups and local mental health groups.

In the absence of Reach Higher, a collaborative approach to the design and delivery of IAG activities across NI is lacking, and as such, NI is 'behind the curve' compared with the rest of the UK. Furthermore, there is limited access to IAG delivered by FECs in some post-primary schools. Competition between HE providers has increased over the last 10 years, and this, along with tensions between institutional outreach teams and marketing departments, can act as a barrier to collaboration. However, primary research with HE providers in NI reveals that there is a

---

[54] https://taso.org.uk/intervention/multi-intervention-outreach/

[55] CFE Research (2022). *Fourth independent review of impact evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships: A summary of the local impact evidence to date for the Office for Students*.

[56] https://taso.org.uk/intervention/information-advice-and-guidance/

willingness to work more closely together, in order to deliver a joined-up approach that reduces duplication and addresses 'cold spots' (schools and colleges without access to outreach).

Collaborative programmes in the other jurisdictions, such as the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) in Scotland[57] and Uni Connect in England,[58] have found ways to overcome the challenges, in order to collaboratively deliver benefits for institutions and the students who participate. According to those interviewed, students would like more opportunities to gain information and advice from those studying their preferred degree programme (in addition to meeting with alumni, lecturers and tutors), to help inform their decision-making. There are a number of ways to facilitate this, including campus visits (see below).

Campus visits

Campus visits are offered by the universities in NI. Although these are primarily targeted at post-primary school pupils, one institution offers *primary* school pupils the opportunity to take part in a host of activities on campus, which are designed to introduce and familiarise them with the HE environment. Primary school is regarded as the most appropriate time to start the conversation about HE with families, and disadvantaged parents and carers in particular.[59] One interviewee stated:

> *We know from research [that] the younger children are exposed to these [outreach] opportunities, and the seeds of aspiration and encouragement are planted, the more likely they are in the future to see that being a possible pathway for them.*
>
> — **HE provider**

Campus visits are a relatively low-cost intervention. Although the current body of evidence on their impact is limited, it suggests that they can have a positive influence on potential applicants' knowledge of HE, including what student life is like, the academic, pastoral and financial support available, and the costs and benefits of HE.[60]

There is anecdotal evidence[61] that campus visits can also positively influence aspirations towards HE. However, early evidence from the evaluation of Uni Connect in England suggests that any intervention that exposes students to the HE environment (such as a campus visit or summer school) can have a *negative* influence if the focus is not appropriately tailored to the students' age/year group and interests. Younger cohorts may benefit most when the intervention focuses on raising

[57] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/access-inclusion/access-initiatives/shep/schools-higher-education-programme.aspx

[58] CFE Research, SHU and BIT (2019). *End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations of the National Collaborative Outreach programme* (now known as Uni Connect).

[59] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014). *National strategy for access and student success in higher education*.

[60] CFE Research (2022). *Fourth independent review of impact evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships*. A summary of the local impact evidence to date for the Office for Students.

[61] Browitt, A. & Ingram, R. (2018). *A blueprint for fairness in the Glasgow region: Exploring widening access activities to inform a collaborative, regional approach*.

awareness, and challenging perceptions of the types of people who go to HE and whether they would 'fit in', rather than on specific subjects on offer.[62]

Attainment raising

A key goal set out in *Access to Success* was that post-primary educational attainment in NI would be among the highest in Europe, with 70% achieving five GCSE passes at grades A*–C, including English and maths. There is substantial evidence that GCSE attainment is a principal determinant of progression to HE.[63] Therefore, raising attainment at this and the subsequent stage in the educational journey is critical to increasing the progression rate.[64] Academic support programmes are designed to help potential applicants achieve the grades necessary for HE, and to develop the literacy, numeracy and critical thinking skills required to succeed in higher-level study. Schools in NI frequently offer additional tuition, particularly in the run-up to examinations. In addition, interventions are delivered by HE providers to help raise attainment, including workshops, tutoring, summer schools and mentoring.

Attainment workshops

Evidence from the WAPP analysis and HE provider interviews demonstrates that attainment raising forms a core part of the outreach offer. For example, 'Taking Boys Seriously' delivered by Ulster University targets young, disadvantaged males in order to improve their attainment and increase their rate of progression to HE through skills and attainment workshops.

A recent review of existing evidence on the impact of attainment-raising activities suggests that interventions that seek to develop students' confidence and support their revision of a subject can contribute to improvements in attainment.[65] However, the effects of any pupil-level intervention can be mitigated by a range of factors that are also associated with attainment, such as teaching quality, the characteristics of a school (including its leadership), and the background and characteristics of the students themselves.[66] While it is not possible for the HE sector to address all these barriers, there is scope to help schools and colleges overcome some of them, to enhance attainment. The 'Easter School' programme, led by the West Belfast Partnership Board with St Mary's University College, seeks to do just that. The programme is designed to assist young people to obtain a grade C or above in their GCSE English and maths. Students identify the topics they need help with, and these provide the focus for the sessions, which are developed and delivered by local teachers working with lecturers from St Mary's. The Easter School is now in its 25th

[62] CFE Research (2020). *An independent review of evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships*. A report for the Office for Students on the findings from the second call for local evaluation evidence.

[63] E.g. Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A., & Vignoles, A. (2010). *Widening Participation in Higher Education: Analysis using Linked Administrative Data.* IFS Working Paper W10/04, London.

[64] Burgess, S. & Thomson, D (2019) *Making the grade: The impact of GCSE reforms on the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.* London: The Sutton Trust

[65] Robinson, D. & Salvestrini, V. (2020). *The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education: A review of the evidence.* Education Policy Institute.

[66] OfS (2018). *Topic briefing: Raising attainment in schools and colleges to widen participation*.

year. Over this time it has grown in student numbers and expanded into other parts of Belfast. In 2020, 86% of students who attended the programme achieved at least a grade C in English, and 65% a grade C in maths.

Summer schools and residentials

Access to Success states that summer schools should be a central part of any awareness- and attainment-raising programme. However, these interventions are costly and resource-intensive to deliver, which can present a challenge for some providers, such as colleges, that have relatively modest WP budgets. The evidence suggests that summer schools have only been delivered by the minority of larger HE providers in NI, some of which are targeted at specific under-represented groups, such as care leavers. Some HE providers have discontinued some of their activity (perhaps, more recently, as a result of COVID-19 restrictions). For example, Ulster University previously delivered 'Step Up', a science-based programme of academic and vocational activities that included a four-day summer school. However, there is no evidence that this programme continued beyond 2014/15.

Wider evidence suggests there is a positive association between attendance at a summer school and GCSE attainment.[67] There is also evidence that summer schools can help students to develop a better understanding of the HE offer, and increase their intention to apply. Evidence regarding their effect on application and acceptance rates is, however, more mixed.[68] TASO is currently partnering with eight HE providers in England to strengthen the evidence base, by evaluating summer schools' effectiveness in improving HE access for disadvantaged and under-represented students. The final results of the randomised control trial will be available in 2024.[69]

Tutoring and mentoring

HE providers are increasingly targeting primary-aged children and their parents, through their outreach activities to help raise attainment. Tutoring has been shown to be one of the most effective ways to accelerate pupil progress: small group and one-to-one tuition can advance progress by three to five months per pupil.[70]

In NI, the 'Tutoring in Schools' programme places Ulster University student volunteers in primary and secondary schools to support staff and pupils on any project. Northern Regional College introduced a homework programme for parents in 2019/20, to equip them with the skills to support their primary-aged children with literacy and numeracy. Although the roll-out of the programme was severely

---

[67] Evidence provided in Evidence Toolkit developed by TASO.

[68] Robinson, D. & Salvestrini, V. (2020). *The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education: a review of the evidence*.

[69] https://taso.org.uk/news-item/new-research-partners-summer-schools-evaluation/

[70] See https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/small-group-tuition?utm_source=/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/small-group-tuition&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_search&search_term=tui

impacted by the pandemic, it has the potential to support attainment raising post-pandemic.

The volume of mentoring activity offered by HE providers has also increased over time. This type of intervention is delivered to raise attainment, as well as aspirations among prospective students (and to support their retention once in HE – see Chapter 4). For instance, the 'Reading Together' programme from Queen's University provides one-to-one mentoring for Year 6 pupils, to enhance their enjoyment of reading and improve literacy skills. Furthermore, 'My Laces',[71] a programme for looked-after children, provides positive role models drawn from Ulster University's Social Work students, who help to raise educational aspirations, assist with literacy and numeracy, and introduce students to new subjects, including engineering and sport.

Wider evidence suggests that mentoring can help to equip learners with enhanced academic study skills, as well as increase their understanding of the HE offer, their confidence to succeed in HE, and the likelihood that they will apply.[72] Mentors can support prospective students in developing more accurate perceptions of HE and student life, by challenging negative stereotypes about the types of people who go to university. This is important, as lack of a sense of 'belonging' and 'fitting in' have been shown to act as a barrier to access (as well as to retention and success).[73]

Many mentoring programmes have shifted to online delivery in the context of the pandemic. Evidence suggests that this approach can be as effective as face-to-face models; it is associated with improvements in learners' ability to make informed choices, and their likelihood of applying to HE.[74]

Alternative entry routes

Foundation Degrees

Foundation Degrees focus on a particular job or profession, and combine academic and workplace skills. Students achieve a 'stand-alone' qualification which can be 'topped up' to a full honours degree. Foundation Degrees were launched primarily to widen access to HE for people in work; as such, they are open to those with limited or no formal qualifications, but who have commercial or industry experience.[75] A number of HE providers in NI offer Foundation Degrees in a range of disciplines, which are accredited by three universities in the jurisdiction.

---

[71] https://www.ulster.ac.uk/employability/edge/edge-activities/social-work-students-mentoring-young-looked-after-children-with-educational-support-my-laces

[72] https://taso.org.uk/intervention/mentoring-counselling-role-models-post-entry/

[73] Sanders, J. & Higham, L. (2012). *The role of higher education students in widening access, retention and success. A literature synthesis of the widening access, student retention and success national programmes archive.* Higher Education Academy.

[74] CFE Research (2022). *Fourth independent review of impact evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships: A summary of the local impact evidence to date for the Office for students.*

[75] https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/what-and-where-study/choosing-course/foundation-degrees

Access to Success set a target to increase enrolments in Foundation Degrees to 2,500 (from a baseline of 1,132 in 2010); the aim was to widen access to HE for those in work, to help address skills shortages. An advertising campaign, 'Project 20', ran until March 2015, to raise awareness of Foundation Degrees' benefits among employers and the workforce. By the 2013/14 academic year, the target had been exceeded: 2,528 students were enrolled in Foundation Degrees; this included a rise in the number enrolled in STEM-based programmes, which was identified as a particular priority at that time.

Contextual admissions

Policy-makers and HE providers alike are increasingly recognising that academic qualifications alone are not the best indicator of a student's potential, and that a range of contextual factors influence attainment. In response, the use of contextual admissions is starting to become embedded in parts of the UK's HE sector, to support widening access and increase fairness in the application process for certain WP target groups. In Scotland, for example, the CoWA recommended that by 2019 all universities should set *access thresholds* to admit students from the most deprived backgrounds[76] which recent research suggests are "mathematically necessary" to achieve equitable access in Scottish universities.[77] In response, institutions developed contextual admissions processes that enable students who meet specific criteria to receive an offer several grades below the standard offer, on a range of programmes. This practice is mirrored in England, with a growing number of high-tariff institutions in particular implementing contextual admissions as part of their widening access strategies.[78] Institutions take a range of characteristics into account in their contextual admissions, including free school meal and disability status. Drawing on a variety of measures is important as, in many cases, a range of factors combine to disadvantage learners and reduce their level of achievement.[79]

Currently, Queen's University Belfast is the only HE provider in NI that makes contextual offers. Its Pathway Opportunity Programme[80] was launched in 2017, and targets students aged 16–19 in the first year of their A-Level (or equivalent) qualifications who meet certain eligibility criteria.[81] The aim is to prepare students who might be aspiring to study at Queen's for the transition to university life by equipping them with academic skills and confidence, and supporting them with their university applications. Those who successfully complete the programme receive a

---

[76] *A Blueprint for Fairness*.

[77] Boliver, V., Gorard, S., Powell, M. & Moreira, T. (2020) *Scottish Affairs*, 29.1: 82–97. https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2020.0307

[78] Boliver, V. et al. (2017). *Admissions in context: the use of contextual information by leading universities* and CFE (2021) *Contextual admissions in London's HEIs: A report for The Greater London Authority*.

[79] Gorard et al. (2017). *Which are the most suitable contextual indicators for use in widening participation to HE?* Working Paper. School of Education and School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University, Durham.

[80] https://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/sgc/wpu/Post16Programmes/PathwayOpportunityProgramme/

[81] https://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/sgc/wpu/Post16Programmes/PathwayOpportunityProgramme/InformationforStudents/#am-i-eligible-for-the-programme-984207-2

reduced-grade conditional offer or a guaranteed interview. One of the student interviewees who had participated in the programme said: #

> *It was absolutely fantastic. I felt that it really gave me an insight into what [Law] is and the different types of fields within it. We got to speak with some of the barristers, and some judges as well. It was really insightful.*
> — **Student interviewee**

Although contextual admissions are still in their infancy, and the volume of evidence on their impact is limited, current insights suggest that it is possible to significantly reduce entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged learners without jeopardising their chances of succeeding at degree level. However, subsequent on-programme support for contextual-offer students is important, to ensure they are retained and achieve at the same level as their more advanced peers. [82]

Barriers to HE for under-represented groups

The barriers to HE for under-represented groups have been the subject of research for many years. The key barriers are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Barriers to access

Situational barriers[83;84]	• Poverty / lack of financial resources • Digital poverty • No familial experience of HE • Lack of HE or professional role models or contacts in the local community • Living some distance from HEIs • Family or caring responsibilities (especially mature learners) • Work responsibilities (especially mature learners) • Little awareness of financial support packages • Less practical knowledge of the application process • Do not have the required entry qualifications • Lack of access to suitable accommodation
Motivational barriers	• Negative personal or parental experiences of education • Lack of self-belief in ability to achieve entry requirements / study at a higher level • Less aware / unaware of the relative costs and benefits of HE • Worries about the cost of HE and future debt • Desire to work / earn money immediately
Institutional barriers[85]	• Lack of 'doorstep availability' of particular courses • Lack of information, e.g. entry requirements, course content, career pathways • Limited availably of CIAG provision in communities or workplaces • Limited access to WP in 'cold spots' • Admissions processes

---

[82] Boliver, V., Gorard, S. & Siddiqui, N. (2019). 'Using contextual data to widen access to higher education', *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2019.1678076

[83] Situational and motivational barriers drawn from Wilson et al. (2018). *Barriers to participation and progression in education: A review of the evidence*.

[84] Gorard, S. & Smith, E. (2006). *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*.

[85] Boliver, V. et al. (2017). *Admissions in context: the use of contextual information by leading universities* and https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/publications/working-to-widen-access/

This research for the Department has identified a number of other factors that are associated with progression to HE that are particularly pertinent to the NI context. These are explored below.

Prevailing attainment gaps

GCSE attainment is the main predictor of progression to HE.[86] Research suggests that in NI there are long-standing achievement gaps associated with certain student characteristics, including socio-economic status (measured in terms of Free School Meals Entitlement – FSME), gender, type of school attended (grammar or non-grammar) and religious affiliation (Protestant or Roman Catholic).[87] In grammar school settings, the vast majority of pupils (96.9%) achieve at least five GCSEs at grades A*– C including English and Maths. The equivalent figure for non-grammar school pupils is 62.4%.[88] When socio-economic status, gender, and religious affiliation are also taken into account, further differences emerge. In each year from 2015/16 to 2018/19, the attainment of Protestant FSME boys was less than half that of Roman Catholic non-FSME girls; for example, in 2019, 37.9% of Protestant FSME boys gained five or more GCSEs (A*– C) including English and maths, compared with 85.3% of Roman Catholic non-FSME girls. [89] The attainment gaps between groups are also evident at A Level, driven by previous school type (39.9%), FSME (24.9%), gender (15.1%) and, to a lesser extent, religion (5.5%). Grammar school pupils, those from higher socio- economic groups, females and Roman Catholics more likely to achieve three A-levels at A*-C than non-grammar school pupils, those from lower socio- economic groups, males and Protestants. [90] This strongly indicates that it is the intersection between an individual's characteristics that predicts their performance at GCSE and A Level, and this in turn influences the likelihood that they will progress to HE. As a result, some groups, particularly Protestant males from lower socio-economic backgrounds, remain under-represented.

---

[86] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Sutton Trust (2009). *Applications, Offers and Admissions to Research Led Universities: Research paper #5*.

[87] Demie, F. (2021). *The Educational Underachievement of disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland: challenges and good practice for tackling inequalities*. Contained within Annex G: *A Fair Start. Final report and action plan*.

[88] See also the Department of Education's statistical bulletins on the qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers, which have informed the statistics quoted here: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-leavers

[89] Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland (2021). *A fair start. Final report and Action Plan*.

[90] See also the Department of Education's statistical bulletins on the qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers, which have informed the statistics quoted here: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-leavers

Situational and institutional barriers

The cost of HE

Northern Ireland-domiciled students who study in NI currently pay annual tuition fees of up to £4,530 (academic year 21/22). Those who choose to study elsewhere in the UK can expect to pay up to £9,250 per year. In this context, the cost of HE, student funding and fear of debt are frequently cited as barriers to HE.[91] Research focusing on England suggests that the introduction of tuition fees has actually led to *increased* enrolments, as well as greater equity in HE,[92] and the system of tuition fee loans and income-contingent repayment systems has largely mitigated the impact of tuition fees for many students. There is also evidence that NI-domiciled students are not necessarily deterred from studying in other parts of the UK by the higher cost of tuition (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, some students from under-represented groups report that they are deterred by the cost of HE, particularly when the cost of accommodation and wider living expenses are also taken into account. One student interviewee indicated that the cost of HE had been a factor in their decision to opt for an apprenticeship rather than a degree.

Availability of suitable HE provision

Issues relating to rurality also have a particularly profound effect on progression to HE in Northern Ireland for some NI-domiciled students. As noted in Chapter 2, some students leave NI to go to HE – reluctantly or by choice – because the programme they wish to study is not available locally. Although the lack of suitable HE provision in NI does not, therefore, act as a barrier to HE *in general* for these students who are able to move and study at a GB institution, it can act as a barrier for others, including those from under-represented groups, who are less able to move and much more likely to study HE while living at home.[93]

The pandemic has been a catalyst for HE providers to adapt their delivery methods, and many now offer remote or blended learning. While this has the potential to widen access for those who are not able to relocate to study, either elsewhere in NI or in GB, evidence from the interviews with students suggests that digital poverty across NI (i.e., lack of access to a fast, stable Wi-Fi connection and/or internet-enabled device) exacerbates existing challenges for under-represented groups and acts a further barrier to HE.

Overcoming barriers to access

The WAPP analysis summarised in Figure 3 above demonstrates that HE providers in NI are delivering a range of outreach activities that are shown to have a positive influence and help to address some of the barriers to access for under-represented

[91] Callender, C. & Mason, G. (2017). *Does student loan debt deter Higher Education participation? New evidence from England.* Institute of Education.

[92] Murphy, R., Scott-Clayton, J. & Wyness, G. (2018). *The end of free college in England: implications for quality, enrolments, and equity.* Centre for Global Higher Education UCL.

[93] Donnelly, M. & Gamsu, S. (2018). *Home and away: social, ethnic and spatial inequalities in student mobility.*

groups. NI's HE providers appear to be placing great emphasis on addressing attainment gaps so that more students achieve the qualifications necessary for HE, which mirrors the recent shift in WP policy in England. However, analysis by the Office for Students demonstrates that progression to HE is lower than might be expected, given GCSE attainment in almost 1,000 areas of England; this suggests that raising attainment alone will not be sufficient to close the gap and ensure equality of access to HE. Shifting attitudes to HE is also needed, including perceptions of types of people who study for a degree, and the return on investment in financial and non-financial terms.

> *As a teacher for years, I still see that there's a lack of ambition amongst young males and they lack a sense of wanting to do something academic. How you change that, probably is something that needs to be done before they reach us.*
> — **HE-in-FE provider**

Tailored IAG, and support for students to develop the knowledge, skills and self-belief that HE is a viable option for them are also required, along with more diverse entry routes.[94]

Importance of intersectionality and tailored support

The analysis clearly demonstrates that it is essential to understand the intersectionality between different student characteristics, and how it shapes and influences attainment, attitudes to HE and the likelihood of progression. Although some provision is tailored to specific under-represented groups, there is limited evidence of bespoke interventions to address entrenched inequalities, such as the gaps in attainment and progression for Protestant males from lower socio-economic groups.

There is evidence from Uni Connect partnerships in England that multi-intervention programmes, including tailored skills and attainment workshops, can be an effective way to increase the knowledge and raise the aspirations of males from lower socio-economic groups. The evidence also suggests that the effectiveness of any intervention (including campus visits and mentoring) is enhanced if student ambassadors with a similar background to the target group are involved in delivery.[95]

Some of the consulted HE providers highlighted the challenges of delivering outreach activity to prospective students in rural settings. As a result, some students miss out on interventions that could help to support and encourage them to consider applying to HE. Addressing these 'cold spots' in the provision of outreach (as well as HE provision) could therefore help to strengthen the current offer. This could be achieved through greater use of technology to deliver outreach remotely. However, digital poverty, particularly in rural areas, could reduce the impact of this approach. Instead, policy-makers and HE providers could consider ways to foster a more

---

[94] BMG Research and CFE Research (2017). *Understanding changes gaps in higher education in different regions of England.* Research report for the Department for Education.

[95] CFE Research (2020). *An independent review of evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships.* A report for the Office for Students on the findings from the second call for local evaluation evidence.

collaborative approach to outreach, capitalising on each provider's connections with schools in its local area. For instance, members of Uni Connect partnerships have successfully addressed some cold spots in outreach provision in England by working more collaboratively, and through newly established Outreach Hubs.[96]

Technical and vocational routes into HE

As noted above, the number of enrolments in Foundation Degrees has increased following the launch of *Access to Success*. Foundation Degrees provide an alternative route to a higher-level qualification for those in work and/or with limited prior educational attainment. BTECs have become an increasingly important route into university, with one-in-four university admissions in England involving at least one BTEC qualification.[97] A light-touch review of HE providers' websites suggests that they all accept technical and vocational qualifications (including BTECs and NVQs), as well as academic qualifications such as A-Levels, as part of their entry requirements, ensuring that students with these qualifications are not placed at a disadvantage when applying to HE. The introduction of higher level apprenticeships has further expanded the range of entry routes into HE. Contextual admissions are also becoming embedded within NI's most selective institutions, to ensure that students are not deterred from applying by external factors that may have hindered their attainment. There may be scope to further enhance alternative entry routes to HE, in order to widen access for more under-represented groups, by drawing on experience in other jurisdictions.

T-Levels

T-Levels, which are equivalent to three A-Levels, have recently been introduced in England as an alternative route to HE. However, significant concerns have subsequently been raised about the associated de-funding of other qualifications in England – including BTECs – and the negative impact this could have on take-up of technical and vocational qualifications at Level 3, access to HE, and social mobility. Indeed, the Department for Education's recent assessment of the impact of T-Levels states that fewer students will attain Level 3 as a result of the reforms, and that this will have a small negative impact on some groups that are already under-represented in HE, including students aged 19+, females, learners with a disability, and students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME).[98, 99] Furthermore, although the NexT Level campaign states that T-Levels are recognised by universities, there are questions as to whether some institutions (particularly selective institutions, including the Russell Group) will accept them, and what types of courses T-Level students will be able to progress to. At present, NI is still considering the approach it will adopt regarding the future of vocational qualifications. It will be important to

---

[96] CFE Research (2019). *End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme* (now known as Uni Connect).

[97] https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/SMF-Vocation-Vocation-Vocation.pdf

[98] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-post-16-qualifications-at-level-3-in-england

[99] https://feweek.co.uk/alarming-lack-of-bame-students-in-first-year-of-t-levels/

take account of the learning from reforms such as these in England, before making significant changes to the current provision.

Foundation programmes (Year 0)

Foundation years are well established as a route into creative HE programmes, such as art and design. The Sutton Trust[100] and a review of social mobility and child poverty[101] recommended that foundation programme or 'Year 0' provision should be expanded, with greater targeting of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to help widen access. A growing number of institutions in England and Wales, and highly selective institutions in particular, are now developing foundation programmes as part of their WP offer. A 'Year 0' is designed to bridge the attainment gap for students from WP backgrounds (including those admitted contextually) by helping them to develop the knowledge and skills needed to study and succeed at a higher level. For example, Oxford University recently launched a fully funded one-year programme targeted at students with high academic potential from WP backgrounds.[102] A contrasting and potentially controversial recommendation made by the Augar review is that universities should remove funding for foundation years and redirect resources towards lower-cost Access to HE Diplomas provided by FECs, in order to deliver better value for the taxpayer and for students.[103] In practice, Year 0 and Access to HE diplomas are likely to appeal to different audiences (younger students progressing with Level 3 qualifications, and mature students with limited or no prior qualifications, respectively). Thus, while it is important for policy-makers to consider the potential impact of offering foundation 'Year 0' programmes on demand for existing provision, including Foundation Degrees, their introduction is unlikely to fundamentally alter the dynamics of the HE sector in NI. This is because, unlike Foundation Degrees, Year 0 programmes have specific entry requirements, are not typically stand-alone qualifications, and are predominantly a route into high-tariff institutions. As such, they should not duplicate existing provision, or increase competition between HEIs (which currently focus on provision at Level 6+) and FECs (for Levels 4 and 5).

---

[100] Boliver, V., Crawford, C., Powell, M. & Craig, W. (2017). *Admissions in Context: The use of contextual information by leading Universities*.

[101] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/80188/Higher-Education.pdf

[102] https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/increasing-access/foundation-oxford

[103] https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/05/30/four-ways-the-augar-review-impacts-on-widening-participation-in-higher-education/

04. Retention, achievement and progression

In the 10 years since *Access to Success*[104] was launched, policy across the UK has increasingly emphasised the importance of a 'lifecycle approach' to access and participation in HE. This has led to a greater focus on the retention and achievement of under-represented groups who progress to HE, as well as on the outcomes achieved.[105, 106] This chapter draws on the WAPP analysis to explore current support for retention, achievement and progression in NI, and how it could be further strengthened to address prevailing gaps among under-represented groups.

Summary

- The volume and range of retention activities has increased since *Access to Success* was launched. However, the level of activity focussed on enhancing outcomes for under-represented groups has remained largely unchanged.

- HE providers deliver targeted support to enhance the retention and improve the attainment of specific under-represented groups, such as care leavers, as well as embedded programmes that can be accessed by any student from a WP background, or all students in some instances.

- Retention activities provide practical help, advice and support, to enable students to integrate into university life. Emerging evidence suggests that these activities are associated with increased retention rates.

- Several HE providers deliver mentoring and tutoring programmes to support WP students in developing study skills, as well as strategies for coping with the pressures of HE. The limited evidence available from the sector suggests that these approaches can have a positive impact on both attainment and retention.

- Placements, work experience and help with CV development are the primary mechanisms in place to support progression to graduate employment.

- Evidence suggests that placements and work experience can enhance WP students' employment prospects.

- There is limited research on the reasons for gaps in progression and success. There are gaps in the outcomes achieved by disabled students in particular, which require further exploration. Addressing these gaps is likely to require a joined-up approach between HE providers, employers and wider stakeholders.

---

[104] *Access to Success*.

[105] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014). *National strategy for access and student success in HE*.

[106] Department for Employment and Learning (2012). *Access to Success – An integrated regional strategy for widening participation in HE*.

Bridging gaps in retention, achievement and progression for under-represented groups are important strands of HE providers' WP strategies. Analysis of the WAPPs demonstrates that the level of investment in retention activities across the sector in NI has increased over time (along with investment in activity to widen access – see Chapter 3). Although investment in activities to support achievement and progression has remained largely unchanged, a range of activities are in place. Most interventions engage a variety of students; some target particular groups, but there is no evidence of specific interventions to address gender gaps (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Volume of retention and achievement (R&A) and progression (P) activities offered by HE providers, by target group.

	Disadvantaged	Disability	Care experienced	Gender	Age	Multi-target group
IAG	R&A P	R&A	R&A			R&A P
Mentoring	R&A		R&A			R&A
Multi-intervention		R&A				R&A
Tutoring	R&A	R&A				R&A
Placement	P					
Subject masterclass			R&A			R&A
Skills attainment workshop						R&A
Staff CPD						R&A

Key: ● 1–5 activities ● 6–10 activities

Retention and achievement

HE providers are now investing more in improving student retention and reducing non-continuation rates, with a notable expansion in activities over the past 10 years. Retention activities are designed to provide practical help (e.g., financial support – see Chapter 5), as well as advice and support for integrating into university life.

Extended inductions and targeted support programmes

All HE providers have systems in place to monitor students at risk of dropping out. Many HE providers offer specialist support for WP students, which is often multifaceted and designed to improve retention (and achievement) through sustained engagement. Interventions take various forms and can be targeted at students from a WP background or specific sub-groups. For example, 'Fostering Aspirations' is an intervention for care-experienced students offered by Ulster University. It provides a package of support, including a care-leaver bursary, year-round accommodation in halls, and guidance and support from a dedicated adviser.[107]

---

[107] https://www.ulster.ac.uk/flexible-education/community/care-leavers

Extended induction programmes also form part of the offer in NI to support students as they transition to HE, and in the early stages of their HE journey. Extended inductions include advice on financial support and budgeting, exam support, and mentoring. For example, the 'Transition Support Programme' at Queen's aims to ensure that students from a WP background successfully settle into the university and become fully engaged in student life. Participating students have the opportunity to complete assessed components,[108] and gain accreditation towards Degree Plus[109] – an employability award that formally recognises any extracurricular activities students engage in to strengthen their CV.

These programmes tend to be of moderate to high delivery cost, yet there is limited evidence from the wider sector to determine the full extent of their impact on student retention, particularly in a UK context. However, emerging evidence,[110] including from Scotland,[111] suggests there is a positive association with student retention rates.

Tutoring and mentoring

Retention and achievement are often interrelated, as poor or lack of attainment can be a cause of non-continuation. Mentoring and tutoring are offered by most HE providers to increase the retention and achievement of under-represented groups. Tutoring is typically a formal intervention with a relatively narrow focus, such as on the development of subject knowledge or academic study skills. Mentoring, on the other hand, can be both formal and informal, and supports students with a specific issue or their general wellbeing, including developing a sense of 'belonging' to HE and 'fitting in'. For example, at Stranmillis University College, student ambassadors from a WP background provide general support to their peers. Similarly, the 'First Class Writing Centre' at St Mary's University College offers support with academic writing, with priority given to students from WP backgrounds, including those without a family history of HE. St Mary's also employs a mental health tutor who helps WP students to implement coping strategies for the stress and pressures of HE, particularly in the run-up to examinations.

Understanding the impact of mentoring programmes is challenging because of the diversity in provision, and existing evaluation evidence presents a mixed picture. However, there is some evidence that such programmes can have a positive impact on both retention and attainment, particularly when mentors share similar backgrounds and characteristics to those they support.[112]

---

[108] https://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/sgc/learning/LearningResources/TransitionSkillsforUniversityModule/
[109] https://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/degreeplus/
[110] https://taso.org.uk/intervention/programmes-of-student-support-post-entry/
[111] https://www.fairaccess.scot/intervention/extended-induction/
[112] https://taso.org.uk/intervention/mentoring-counselling-role-models-post-entry/

Barriers to retention and achievement

At the time *Access to Success* was launched, there was a high correlation between those considered at risk of non-continuation and WP characteristics.[113] Barriers to retention, like the barriers to access, are well documented and are similar irrespective of where a student lives or studies in the UK. Many of these factors also have an impact on a student's ability to achieve, and/or their level of achievement while in HE. Table 3 provides a summary of barriers to retention, identified through the rapid evidence assessment undertaken as part of this review.

Table 3: Barriers to retention and achievement[114]

Situational barriers	• Poverty / lack of financial resources, need to undertake part-time work while studying full-time • Digital poverty • Work or family responsibilities • Not prepared for the level, type or mode of learning
Motivational barriers	• Social integration – concerns about fitting in or belonging, making friends, homesickness, loneliness, living independently • Academic integration – concerns about 'being good enough' / keeping pace with the demands of academic study • Negative attitudes towards education amongst peer group and/or family • Low self-esteem or confidence
Institutional barriers	• Lack of academic or learning support • Limited pastoral support • No personalised or specialist support, or adjustment for disability • Curriculum is not matched to learning needs

Insights from the interviews with HE providers suggest that, for the most part, barriers to retention have remained unchanged and relate primarily to situational and motivational factors. The pandemic is, however, perceived to have exacerbated these barriers, and financial hardship in particular, over the past two years:

> *Our students are presenting hungry, they're presenting with economic barriers to their education and learning which are real challenges that are difficult for us to address.*
>
> — **HE-in-FE provider**

HE providers point to an increase in the number of students with wellbeing issues, which have also been exacerbated by the pandemic. For example, one HE provider reported that the number of mental health declarations at their institution had

---

[113] Bailey, M. & Borooah, V. (2007). *Staying the Course: An econometric analysis of the characteristics most associated with student attrition beyond the first year of higher education*.

[114] Evidence drawn from BIS (2014). *National strategy for access and student success in higher education*; and Ulster University (2019). *Northern Ireland Skills Barometer: Summary report*.

almost doubled over the last five years (from 6% to 11.4%). Thus, wellbeing issues are becoming a major contributor to non-continuation rates.

> *Students often demonstrate anxiety and depression; it may be family breakdowns, they many have a learning difficulty; the [challenges] are multiple and complex, and the complexity of the support needs coming through has absolutely increased over the last 10 years.*
> — **College provider**

While all HE providers offer support, the increase in demand has placed additional strain on support services. In addition, some report that low levels of awareness of specialist services amongst staff, as well as students, is a barrier to access, and prevents some students from receiving the support they need to continue and succeed in their studies. To help address this, Belfast Metropolitan College has produced a guide and delivers bespoke training, including disability awareness, to enable staff to direct students to appropriate support services.

The stigma associated with accessing support for mental health and wellbeing is also perceived to deter some students who could benefit from these services. The recent increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees enrolling in HE presents additional challenges, as these students require tailored support to meet their learning and emotional needs.

Mature learners, including those in the workforce, were identified as a priority group in *Access to Success*. This group, who often study on a part-time basis, face particular challenges that can impact on retention and achievement, including issues relating to childcare, and balancing work and learning. Adult and part-time learners provide a focus for the Open University's WP activities and almost three-quarters of its student population in NI are in full or part-time employment. However, there is no evidence of any tailored provision for mature learners in the WAPPs from other HE providers.

Progression

Although the volume of activities has not increased substantially over the 10 years since *Access to Success* was launched, a range of interventions are in place to help students achieve positive outcomes; including careers IAG, and placements and work experience, to develop work-related skills and strengthen their CV.

Careers IAG

Most HE providers in NI offer their students careers information, advice and guidance to support their progression to positive outcomes. HE-in-FE providers indicate that CIAG is a particular priority for them. For example, North West Regional College delivers a range of bespoke programmes and interactive workshops that are tailored to individual need and designed to help students reach their employment potential.[115] Wider examples of CIAG provision in HEIs include 'Future

---

[115] https://www.nwrc.ac.uk/student-support/supporting-you/careers-academy

Skills Week' at Ulster University[116] and the Student Mentoring Programme at Queen's University Belfast.[117] Both programmes involve employers and industry experts who provide information, advice and insight about specific careers and sectors. Those from WP backgrounds (particularly 'first in family' to attend HE), who often lack access to networks and professional role models to support them in their decision-making and transition to work, are targeted for these interventions.

Placements and work experience

Evidence suggests that opportunities to undertake work experience or a placement can help to raise attainment and enhance students' employment prospects. For example, a recent study showed that participating in a placement reduced the attainment gap between BAME and White students.[118] Other evidence, including in Scotland, suggests that internships provide short-term advantages for students, in terms of securing employment, achieving higher salaries, and overall job satisfaction.[119]

Most HE providers in NI offer work experience, placements and/or internships for students. For example, alongside Future Skills Week, Ulster University students have access to flexible placement and work-based learning opportunities. The 'Social Mobility Business Partnership' initiative at Queen's University targets students from low-income backgrounds wishing to pursue a career in the business, legal or accountancy professions, and provides CV support and placements.

Barriers to progression

Table 4 outlines common barriers that can impact the outcomes achieved by WP students, irrespective of where they study in the UK.

Table 4: Barriers to success and progression.[120]

Situational barriers	• Poverty / lack of financial resources • Costs of accessing postgraduate study • Lack of opportunities if returning to community of origin • Underemployment / financial pressure to take any job • No family experience of the professions • A lack of knowledge about different career options • Fewer professional role models and networks
Motivational barriers	• Low confidence when navigating applications and interviews • Poor confidence in the graduate job market
Institutional barriers	• Lack of careers-centred IAG • Unclear progression routes to postgraduate study • Absence of financial packages for postgraduate study

---

[116] https://www.ulster.ac.uk/alumniandsupporters/updates/events/future-skills-week-show-up-to-skill-up

[117] https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/EmployerGateway-RecruitOurStudents/QueensWideningParticipationMentoringProgramme/

[118] Moores, E., Birdi, G.K. & Higson, H.E. (2017). 'Placement work experience may mitigate lower achievement levels of black and Asian vs. white students at university'. *Front. Psychol.,* 8, 1518.

[119] https://www.fairaccess.scot/intervention/internships/

[120] Evidence drawn from BIS (2014). *National strategy for access and student success in higher education*; and Ulster University, (2019) *Northern Ireland Skills Barometer: Summary report*.

Data suggests that rates of employment six months after graduation are similar for NI graduates, irrespective of their socio-economic background. In 2016/17, 77.3% of NI-domiciled graduates from the least deprived areas in NI (Quintile 5) who studied at UK HE providers were in some form of employment, compared with 79.3% of graduates from Quintile 1 (most deprived) and 80.6% of graduates from Quintile 2. However, these headline figures mask any 'underemployment'; that is, graduates employed in non-graduate roles. 'Disadvantage' is harder to define in the context of postgraduate study. Nonetheless, certain groups that share many of the characteristics of those defined as 'WP' at undergraduate level are also under-represented at postgraduate level and, as such, are less likely to progress to this outcome. There is, however, little research exploring the reasons for the disparities in outcomes.

Recent statistics highlight that the employment rate for people with disabilities in NI is lower than the UK average: in NI, 38% of people with disabilities are employed, compared with 53% in the UK.[121] Furthermore, one interviewed stakeholder suggested that people with disabilities are less likely to be employed in high-skilled roles. The underemployment of disabled graduates could therefore be a particular issue in NI.

> *We have a pay gap here that is more so down to people with disabilities working in lower-paid and lower-skills roles, rather than higher-skills roles. It's not that we have people with disabilities doing the same job as someone that has not got a disability, and they're being paid less, it's more so that people are completely underemployed.*
>
> — **Wider stakeholder**

Although the WAPP analysis suggests there are mechanisms in place to retain students with disabilities and support their achievement, more needs to be done to assist their progression to outcomes that are commensurate with their qualifications and skills. This is not within the gift of the HE sector to resolve alone; any solution will require input from employers and other government departments, in order to overcome wider structural barriers to employment for people with disabilities, not just graduates.

---

[121] UK statistics obtained from Gov.UK (2022). *Official Statistics: the employment of disabled people 2021*; NI statistics obtained from NISRA (2020). *Disability Employment Gap in Northern Ireland 2020*, Labour Force Survey.

05. Financial support

This chapter reviews the role of financial support in widening access and supporting the retention and achievement of under-represented groups. It also provides insights from the wider evidence regarding the impact of financial support at different stages of the student life cycle.

Summary

- Providers offer information, advice and guidance on the costs of HE, and the financial support available for prospective students and their parents/carers to address any concerns which can act as barriers to access.

- Evidence from the UK HE sector, and internationally, suggests that financial support has a greater impact on retention than on access. Financial support can also contribute to raised attainment by reducing the amount of time students spend doing part-time work while studying full-time.

- HE providers offer a range of financial support, including bursaries and scholarships, which is targeted at under-represented groups, to help primarily with living costs.

Financial barriers to HE

Fear of debt and concerns about cost can act as barriers to accessing HE. The stakeholders consulted perceived that parents' fear of debt, and their lack of understanding of the cost of HE and the financial support available (as well as the financial and wider benefits of a HE qualification), can be particularly detrimental, and may deter some young people who previously aspired to HE. This is understood to be more common amongst parents from MDM Quintile 1. Furthermore, some HE providers suggest that financial concerns, especially fear of debt, are particularly acute for adult learners:

> *For those who are maybe 30, 40, 50 and want to return to HE, the idea of entering that amount of debt later in life is pretty terrifying. We hear that a lot from mature students.*
>
> — **Wider stakeholder**

Financial hardship can also impact on retention rates, with students who cannot afford to sustain themselves being forced to drop out. It can also have a negative effect on levels of attainment, particularly for students (full- and part-time) who struggle to afford essential materials and resources, or who have limited time to study and engage in enrichment activities because they are working alongside their studies. Moreover, it hinders progression, as financial barriers, and/or the necessity to work, prevent students from taking part in work placements or internships, particularly if they are unpaid. Understanding the impact of financial support at different stages in the student life cycle helps to ensure funding is appropriately

allocated and tailored. This is important, given the high cost of this intervention and the significant amount of funding invested in it by HE providers each year.

Overcoming the barriers – evidence of effective practice

The small number of studies that have considered financial support's impact on *access* suggest that it can have a small positive effect on enrolments,[122] but not necessarily on choice of institution.[123] This is because students are unlikely to get confirmation of their eligibility for financial support, and the level of support they will receive, until after the have enrolled at a particular institution. There is also evidence that perceptions of the cost of HE and the availability of financial aid are just two of a number of drivers of behaviour, once an individual has decided to apply to HE.[124]

Most evidence of impact demonstrates an association between financial support and retention and success. However, different types of support have differential effects. For example, cash bursaries to help with the costs of immediate living expenses seem to have a greater impact than fee waivers, which are a deferred cost for most students.[125] Needs-based grants and non-repayable financial support have also been shown to have a positive impact on retention and completion rates for students from low-income households.[126]

There is limited research that compares the impacts of bursaries and scholarships and their relative effectiveness. However, indicative evidence suggests that performance-based awards have a positive impact on retention and attainment. For example, one study reported that retention rates were consistently 15 percentage points higher for those students in receipt of a scholarship. A 20-percentage-point increase in the graduation rate of scholarship recipients over a three-year period was also reported.[127] However, performance-based awards are typically allocated to high-attaining students who are not necessarily from low-income households and do not meet other WP criteria. As such, they make a limited contribution to WP goals.[128] Evidence on the impact of financial support on level of attainment and degree classification is less conclusive. More evidence from the UK context is required, as the current evidence base is dominated by US studies.

---

[122] Robinson, D. & Salvestrini, V. (2020). The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education.

[123] See: https://www4.shu.ac.uk/mediacentre/offa-publishes-new-tools-evaluate-impact-financial-support?filter=Research

[124] See, for example: CFE and the Widening Participation Research Centre, Edge Hill University (2012). *Formative evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme – Interim Report*; CFE and the Widening Participation Research Centre, Edge Hill University (2015). *Evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme – Final Report*.

[125] https://issuu.com/universitiesuk/docs/student_funding_panel and https://ifs.org.uk/publications/6220

[126] https://taso.org.uk/intervention/financial-support-post-entry/

[127] https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/ported/iresearch/upload/RoleScholarshipsStudentRetentionSuccess2017.pdf

[128] Younger, K., Gascoine, L., Menzies, V. & Torgerson, C. (2018). 'A systematic review of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for widening participation in higher education'. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(6). https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1404558

Financial support in NI

Access to Success stipulated that the Department should work with local communities to develop and pilot philanthropic bursary/scholarship programmes across NI. The WAPP documentation provides evidence of both bursary and scholarship provision, along with other forms of financial support such as grants. The eligibility criteria for different forms of financial support vary, but they are commonly based on household income. Some provision is targeted at specific groups who may face particular financial challenges, such as care leavers.

Bursaries

Bursaries enable students from disadvantaged backgrounds to cover some of the cost of their fees and/or living expenses. The Department expects HE providers to offer bursaries to the value of at least 10% of their tuition fee to eligible students. In practice, this means that HE providers charging a fee of £4,630 are expected to offer a bursary of at least £463 to students in receipt of the full Departmental means-tested maintenance grant.

The most recent WAPPs (2021/22) show that the average bursary spend was £346,901 in 2018/19 . The analysis suggests that there has been a downward trend in bursary expenditure as a proportion of overall WP expenditure at most HE providers. The eligibility criteria for bursaries in NI are set nationally, and individual HE providers are required to provide a bursary to all their students who meet the criteria. However, the income threshold for the bursary has remained static for the past few years. As a result, fewer students may meet the criteria, and this may account for some of the reduction in spending on bursary provision overall. Given the recent rise in the cost of living, it may be timely to review the income threshold, to ensure that the bursary retains its value and spending power for students from lower socio-economic groups.

There is limited evidence from the WAPP analysis that HE providers offer any additional forms of bursary. Ulster University indicates that it provides bursaries for specific disadvantaged groups, including care leavers.[129] However, it is possible that resources have been allocated to other forms of financial support (e.g. scholarships – see next section). Several HE providers indicate that they offer targeted grants to meet specific costs, such as IT equipment.

Scholarships

Scholarships can also fulfil a role in ensuring HE is more accessible and affordable. Four HE providers currently offer scholarships. The most recent WAPPs (2021/22) show that the average scholarship spend was £11,500 in 2018/19. The analysis suggests that there has been a upwards trend in expenditure. This suggests that some progress has been made towards the financial support objectives set out in *Access to Success*.

---

[129] The Open University provides bursaries for specific disadvantaged groups including care leavers. However, The OU is not required to submit Part 3 of the WAPP and is not included in the analysis presented here.

IAG

As noted above, financial issues intersect with a range of other factors to shape and influence student (and parental) attitudes towards HE and the likelihood of progression. Lack of understanding about the costs and benefits of HE, along with a lack of awareness of the funding and financial support available, has been shown to be a barrier for some under-represented groups.[130] South West College offers 'Financial Hardship Clinics' to give specialist advice and guidance to students from areas of socio-economic deprivation. This type of support can help to plug gaps in knowledge and address the concerns of young people and their parents – which, along with the provision of financial support, can help to address gaps in access and participation.[131]

---

[130] CFE Research (2021). *An independent evaluation of Uni Connect's impact on intermediate outcomes for learners*.

[131] Sanders et al. (2018). 'Role Models, mentoring and university applications – evidence from a crossover randomised controlled trial in the United Kingdom'. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 20(4), 57–80.

06. Progress towards targets and goals

The HE landscape in NI, along with the rest of the UK, has evolved since *Access to Success* was first launched. The key changes that have provided the backdrop for delivering the strategy include the introduction of differential tuition fees and student number control policies across the UK, and the launch of Higher and Degree Level Apprenticeships. The evolving landscape is likely to have impacted on students' intentions towards HE, choice of course, mode of study, and type and geographical location of HE provider chosen; and these, in turn, have implications for the objectives set out in *Access to Success*. Drawing on insights from secondary data and HE providers' WAPPs, the progress made towards these objectives in NI, compared with the rest of the UK, provides the focus for this chapter.

Summary

- The number of applicants to HE in NI has increased by approximately one-third over the last 10 years. The majority of applicants are from NI-domiciled students, although the proportion of applicants from England has doubled over this period.

- The number of applicants from NI-domiciled students to HE providers in GB has increased by approximately 20%; however, most Northern Irish students choose to study in NI rather than in other parts of the UK.

- Participation gaps have decreased for mature learners and those self-reporting a disability in NI overall. However, the gap between males and females has widened and Protestants are still somewhat less likely to progress to HE than Roman Catholics.

- Individual HE providers are partially meeting their access targets for specific priority groups. However, targets for MDM Quintile 1, young males in Quintile 1 and adult learners are not always being met and should remain a focus of any future approach.

- Non-continuation rates have decreased in NI for both full- and part-time students in the last two years and are lower, based on a seven-year average, than in the UK as a whole.

- While the number and proportion of qualifications achieved by NI-domiciled students have increased, minimal progress has been made in closing this gap for students in MDM Quintile 1 and males.

- All GB nations report progress against their respective benchmarks to meet their WP vision.

Access to HE

The number of applicants to HE providers in NI have increased by nearly a third (32%), from 19,066 in 2006/07 to 25,110 in 2016/17, with most applicants from NI-domiciled students. Over a similar period (2003–2016), despite three-quarters of NI-domiciled HEI students being enrolled at NI HE providers, the number of applicants from NI students to GB HEIs increased by almost 20%. The proportion of acceptances has also slightly increased between 2011/12 and 2021/22, with a notable increase in 2020/21, which could be due to the impact of Covid-19 (see Appendix 4 for further details of applications (Figure 11) and acceptances (Figure 12)). Whether increases in applicants to and acceptances by NI HE providers have translated into increased enrolments for WP priority groups is considered below.

Enrolments to HE

The number of HE enrolments by Northern Ireland-domiciled students at NI HE providers overall has slightly decreased by 1% over the past 10 years (from 59,584 to 58,954). However, when provider type is considered, this shows that HE enrolments at NI FECs have decreased (-9%), while enrolments at NI HEIs have slightly increased (+1%) (see Appendix 4, Figure 13). A decline in the age demographic in the NI population may explain the decreases in HE enrolments by Northern Ireland-domiciled students, until the increase in 2020/21 following the lifting of the Covid-19 restrictions.[132] Some interesting patterns emerge when student characteristics are considered, which shed light on progress towards achieving the WP priorities in NI.

Age

Trends in the data show that NI has made progress in increasing the number of enrolments for mature students. Older age groups (those aged 21 and over) make up a larger proportion of enrolments in NI HEIs than enrolments by NI-domiciled students at UK HEIs (excluding HE-in-FE). At NI HEIs, the proportion of those aged 25+ has increased from 23% to 30% over the past eight years. In contrast, the proportion of those aged 20 and under has decreased from 49% to 43% (see Appendix 4, Figure 15). The age profile for students enrolling in HE-in-FE has remained largely unchanged. Almost three-quarters of this student population are aged 20 and over (see Appendix 4, Figure 14).

Findings also show that FECs attract a higher proportion of enrolments from mature learners than HEIs, with the majority (around 40%) of students being aged 25+. The middle age group (20–24) has remained relatively stable, while the younger and older groups have fluctuated slightly more. As a consequence of the changing demographic profile of the population in NI, there has been a decline in the ratio of young applicants to the number of places. This may have led to higher acceptance rates at HEIs, resulting in a smaller student pool of young HE-in-FE students.
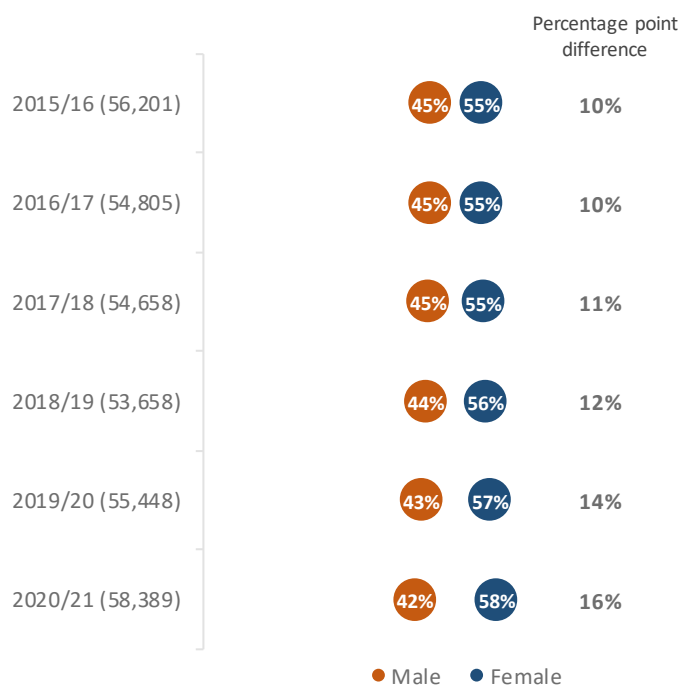
---

[132] https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/MYE20-Bulletin.pdf

Sex

In line with HE participation rates across the UK and Europe, HE enrolments to NI universities and colleges show a greater proportion of female than male students (Figure 5). However, the gap between male and female HE enrolments to NI HEIs and FECs has increased over the past six years, from 10% to 16%. These findings suggest that less progress has been made to increase access to HE for males, despite this being a priority area for NI.

Figure 5: Undergraduate enrolments to NI HEIs and FECs by sex.

	Male	Female	Percentage point difference
2015/16 (56,201)	45%	55%	10%
2016/17 (54,805)	45%	55%	10%
2017/18 (54,658)	45%	55%	11%
2018/19 (53,658)	44%	56%	12%
2019/20 (55,448)	43%	57%	14%
2020/21 (58,389)	42%	58%	16%

● Male ● Female

Data sources: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/enrolments-ni-heis-by-equality-categories-201516-201920 & https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/further-education-college-statistics

Disability

The proportion of enrolments by students self-reporting a disability has increased slightly by 3 percentage points over the past five years, from 9% to 12%. This is slightly lower than across UK HEIs, with a 4-percentage point increase from 13% to 17%.[133] NI HE enrolments for students with a disability (in receipt of DSA) are lower (6%)[134] than in England (17%)[135] and Scotland (16%)[136], although it is acknowledged that this difference could be accounted for, at least in part, by differences in DSA eligibility criteria. Individual HE providers' targets to support students with a

---

[133] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-15
[134] Department for the Economy (2021). Performance indicators in higher education: Northern Ireland analysis 2019/20.
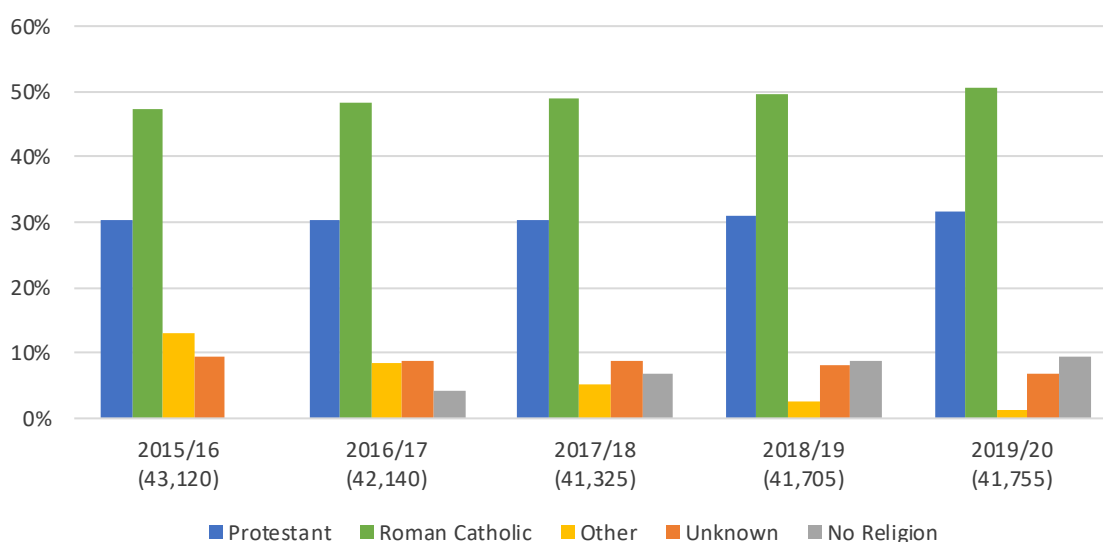[135] OfS (2020). Access and Participation Dashboard. Sector aggregated data.
[136] Scottish Funding Council (2021). Report on Widening Access 2019-20.

disability are considered later in this chapter, with a focus on whether targets are sufficiently ambitious, given the increased number of students declaring a disability.

Religion

Enrolments by Roman Catholics are considerably higher than for Protestants. The gap in the proportion of enrolments by religion in NI has increased slightly over the past five academic years (17% gap in 2015/16 and 19% gap in 2019/20) (Figure 6). This is because Roman Catholic enrolments have increased over the past five years (from 47% to 51%), while Protestant enrolments have remained virtually static (from 30% to 31%). Disparities in student enrolment according to religion, particularly for Protestant males, was highlighted as a priority area in *Access to Success*. These trends suggest that little progress has been made to increase access to HE for Protestant students, and this should remain a priority in a future approach.

Figure 6: Enrolments by NI-domiciled students at NI HEIs by religion.[137]

Data source: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/enrolments-ni-heis-by-equality-categories-201516-201920
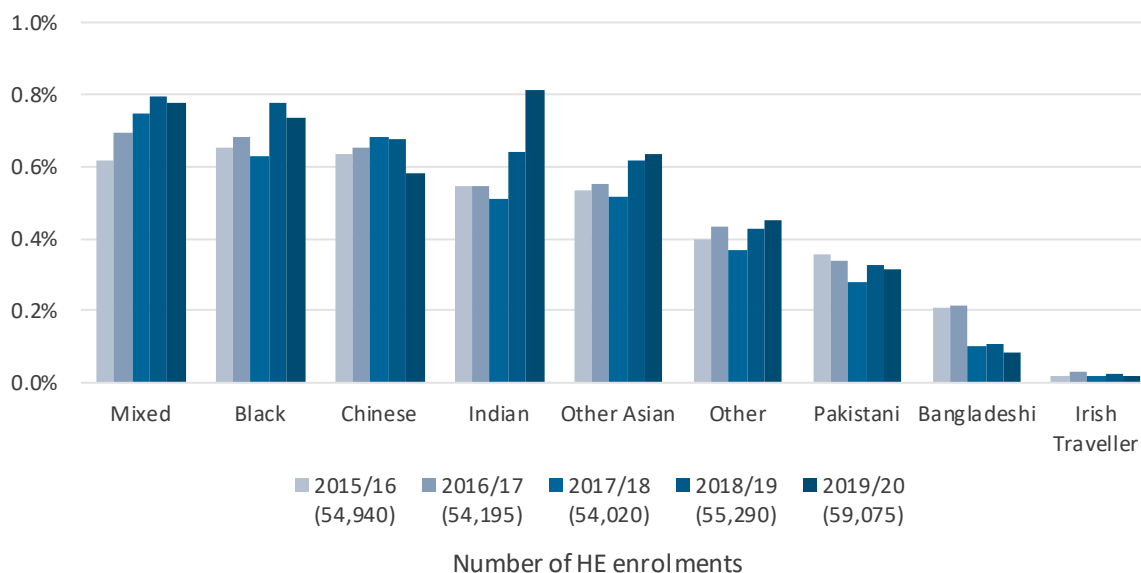
Ethnicity

It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions in relation to HE enrolments for different student ethnicities. The proportion of white students enrolling in HE in NI has decreased over the past five years from 90% to 80%. This change has not been matched by an increase in any specific minority ethnic groups, but by a rise in the 'unknown' category (Figure 7).

---

[137] Information on religion, marital status and dependants is only collected for NI-domiciled students studying at NI HE institutions. Religious affiliation is not a mandatory question and therefore can have a high non-response rate. A new coding framework was added to the HESA data collection for the Religion question in 2016/17, which includes an additional category for 'No Religion'.

Figure 7: Enrolments at NI HEIs by ethnicity, excluding white and unknown.

Data source: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/enrolments-ni-heis-by-equality-categories-201516-201920

HE provider priority groups

To deliver the vision for HE in NI, the Department expects HE providers to outline ambitious WP delivery targets and milestones for a range of student demographic groups, using public and institutional data. In the absence of national WP targets in NI, this section reviews progress made for key priority groups by individual HE providers, by drawing on the most recent WAPP analysis.

Findings from the WAPP data show a mixed picture (Table 5).[138] Providers are most successfully meeting their targets for students with a self-declared disability, with two-thirds (6 out of 10) exceeding their targets. A further five of these HE providers are meeting or exceeding their targets for students in receipt of a DSA. Despite progress made, the Department may wish to consider more ambitious national targets for students with a disability, considering the lower overall participation rate compared to England and Scotland, and the increasing number of students who are declaring disabilities.

Two-thirds of HE providers (6 out of 10) are not meeting their targets for MDM Quintile 1, or for young males from Quintile 1 (5 out of 10 providers). It will be important for the Department to better understand the challenges that some providers face in meeting their targets, given the persistent participation gap for FSM Protestant males.

---

[138] From the 2021/22 WAPP Part 3, which reports on monitoring data for 2018/19. Note that the Open University is not required to submit an annual WAPP and is therefore excluded from this analysis.

Just under half of HE providers are exceeding their target for care-experienced students. However, all but one (South Eastern Regional College) have failed to meet their targets for adult learners.

Table 5: Performance against targets for WP interventions (% actual / target). Green = exceeding target, amber = on target, red = below target, white = no data. Data source: 2021/22 WAPP part 3 reporting on 2018/19 targets.[139]

	MDM Quintile 1 (FT & PT)	Disability: Self-Declared (FT & PT UG)	Disability: in receipt of DSA (FT & PT UG)	Young Males from Quintile 1 (FT & PT)	Adult Learners (FT & PT)	Care Experienced
Belfast Metropolitan College	80%	285%	100%	94%	91%	450%
Queen's University Belfast	105%	172%	113%	107%	95%	42%
St Mary's University	105%	177%	142%	89%	71%	200%
Stranmillis University College	79%	161%	78%	140%	88%	33%
Ulster University	85%	130%	120%	80%	73%	133%
North West Regional College	73%	97%	97%	62%	83%	44%
Northern Regional College	81%	127%	109%	157%	64%	143%
South Eastern Regional College	89%	85%		69%	116%	180%
South West College	182%	70%	45%	281%	92%	0%
Southern Regional College	107%	73%	76%	157%	75%	50%

---

[139] Please note that provider context and location, together with different student numbers at individual providers, are factors that are likely to impact on achievement for specified target priority groups.

Non-continuation in HE

This section examines secondary data sources to explore how non-continuation rates in HE have changed, and whether progress has been made to meet the targets and priorities highlighted in the strategy. Where possible, we compare the NI landscape to other UK nations. It should be noted that there is no available data for examining retention rates by all socio-demographic characteristics (other than age), and there is limited data for HE-in-FE.

Secondary data on the proportion of full and part-time students that do not continue into the second year of their studies suggest that retention rates across NI's HE providers, as well as in the UK as a whole, have fluctuated over seven years.

The non-continuation rate for full-time students at NI HEIs (6.5% seven-year average) is lower than for the UK as a whole (7.6% seven-year average). Furthermore, while non-continuation in NI has decreased, it has steadily increased in the UK as a whole over this period (Figure 8). The seven-year average final year enrolment non-retention rate for full-time students in NI FECs is 5% (see Appendix 4 Figure 16).

Non-continuation rates for part-time students are considerably higher than the rates for full-time students. The seven-year average is similar in NI (33.6%) and the UK as a whole (34.2%), where approximately a third of students do not continue in HE after their first year of study. Although the non-continuation rate for part-time students in NI as well as in the UK reduced between 2017/18 and 2019/20, the decrease is far greater in NI (Figure 9).

Overall, NI HEIs consistently outperform their benchmarks[140] for the retention of both full- and part-time students.[141] Performance against retention benchmarks for part-time students has been particularly strong in most HEIs. Individual institutions, including St Mary's University College and Ulster University, attribute this to closer monitoring of WP target groups since the strategy was introduced. For Ulster University, monitoring is structured around sociodemographic background using the multiple deprivation model. These findings also suggest that retention activities offered by HE providers, targeted at both full- and part-time students (reviewed in Chapter 3), may be impactful. (see Appendix 4 for a breakdown of performance against benchmarks: Figure 17 and Figure 18).

---

[140] Institutional benchmarks for student retention take account of the course profile, entry tariffs and student profile of the provider and as such the performance of institutions with different benchmarks is not comparable. See https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/about

[141] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/higher-education-performance-indicators

Figure 8: Proportion of full-time first-degree entrants at NI HEIs that do not continue into the second year of their studies, by institution, including seven-year average (%). N.B. The Open University (NI) is excluded because it has no full-time students.
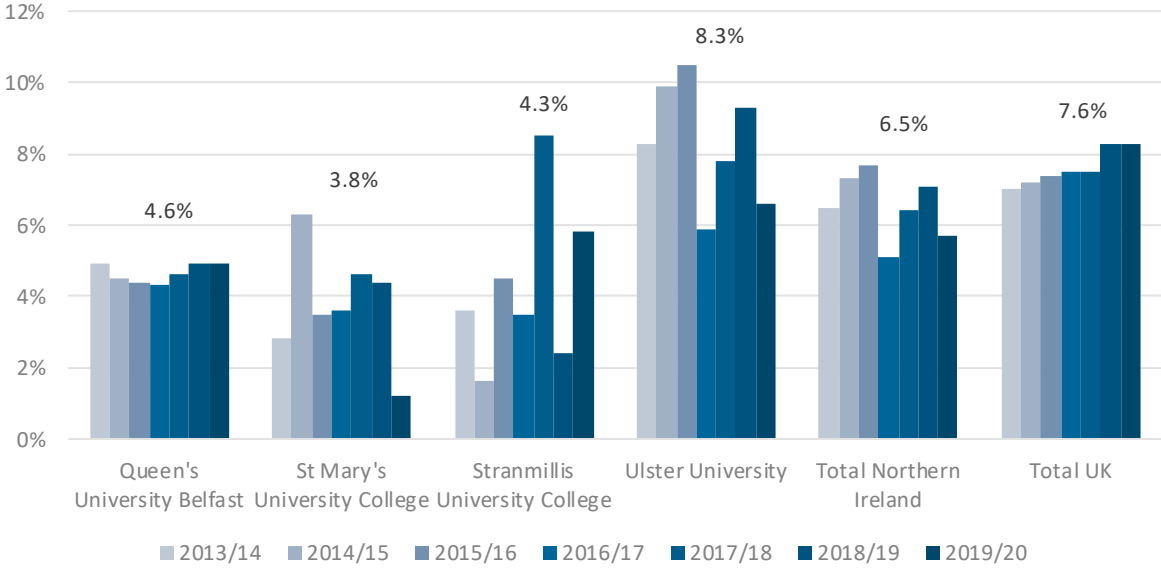
Figure 9: Proportion of part-time first degree entrants at NI HEIs that do not continue into the second year of their studies, by institution, including seven-year average (%). N.B. St Mary's University College is excluded because it has no part-time students.
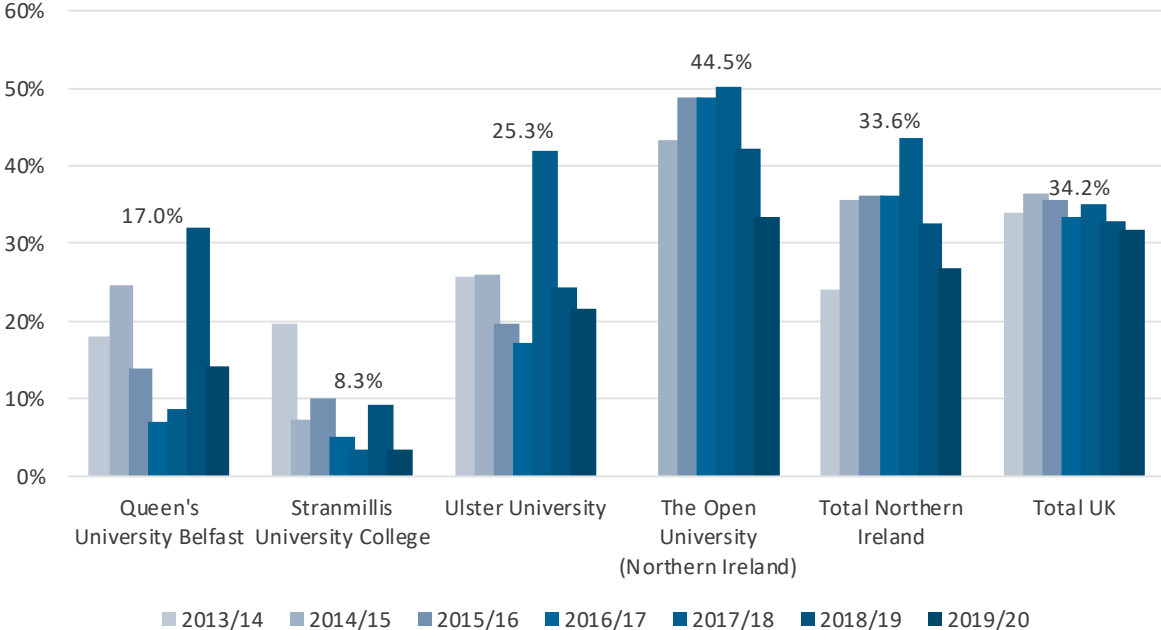
Qualifications achieved

Here, we draw on secondary data to explore progress made against targets to increase the number and proportion of qualifications gained at NI HE providers. Public data sources allow us to examine levels of success using a larger range of socio-demographic characteristics, as well as categories such as mode of study.

Overall, the number of full-time NI-domiciled students successfully gaining a qualification in their studies from an NI HEI has increased at a faster rate (net 22%) than for NI-domiciled students successfully qualifying at a UK HEI (net 14%).[142] However, the percentage change over the past decade for NI-domiciled students successfully gaining a qualification is lower in NI HEIs (24%) compared to Wales (59%), but higher than in England (18%) (Figure 10).

Less progress has been made for part-time NI-domiciled students, with decreases in the proportion of part-time students leaving with a qualification in all UK countries, apart from Scotland (Figure 10). A future approach could specify more ambitious targets for increasing the number and proportion of part-time students who achieve a qualification. Consideration of tailored interventions to help part-time students to successfully complete their studies may also be beneficial.

Figure 10: Percentage change in qualifications gained by NI-domiciled students at UK HEIs by mode of study and location of institution, between 2010/11 and 2020/21.

Data source: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/higher-education-qualifications

---

142 Department for the Economy (2022). Qualifications Gained at UK HEIs: Northern Ireland Analysis 2020/21.

Consideration of student characteristics shows that little progress has been made in increasing the number and proportion of qualifications gained by the most disadvantaged students, with the composition of qualifications gained by the MDM quintiles remaining static over the last five years (see Appendix 4, Figure 19).[143] Minimal progress has also been made to reduce the gender gap for NI-domiciled students, which has remained largely unchanged over the past decade (see Appendix 4, Figure 20). The intersection between MDM quintile and gender shows that among the bottom MDM quintile, the proportion of males receiving a qualification has decreased slightly (by -0.4 percentage points, compared with +0.3pp for females). Thus, in the future, attention should be focussed on the disadvantaged students and males.

Progress towards WP targets in GB

As previously highlighted, the main target common to all countries is to achieve equality in access between the least and most deprived groups. UK jurisdictions use different measures of disadvantage (IMD, NIMDM, SIMD, WIMD). Nations also vary in how they use these measures to set targets, with two main approaches used to compare participation rates: (a) the ratio of Q5 to Q1 and (b) the absolute difference between Q5 and Q1 rates.[144] Area-based measures such as POLAR4 and IMD capture a wide range of specific disadvantages, but they are often not precise enough to target all of those most in need without including less-disadvantaged learners. For this reason, individual-level measures of disadvantage, such as eligibility for free school meals, may be more useful.[145] To overcome the lack of comparability between these national measures, HESA recently published a report on its efforts to create a UK-wide measure of disadvantage, which uses smaller geographic areas than POLAR and IMD.[146] Although there is significant overlap between these measures, there are also distinct differences. However, despite these differences, the overall trend suggests that the gap in participation rates between the top and bottom socio-economic quintiles is smaller in NI, Wales and Scotland compared to England. In the next section, we review in more detail the progress made to deliver the WP vision in GB against national targets.

---

[143] MDM breakdown is not available before 2014/15.

[144] The participation gap can narrow when the ratio of Q5 to Q1 is used even when the absolute difference between Q5 and Q1 rates widen. For this reason, the Department prefers to cite data using the absolute difference between Q5 and Q1 rates.

[145] 'free school meals [is] the best available proxy measure of economic disadvantage' – EEF (2017). *The Attainment Gap*.

[146] Bermingham J., Donnelly, S. & Nathwani, T. (2022). *Using Census Data to Generate a UK-Wide Measure of Disadvantage*.

Scotland

Scotland has made good progress towards fulfilling its WP vision to ensure that students from Scotland's most deprived areas have the same chance of entering HE as those from the least deprived, as detailed in the CoWA's final report.[147] Scotland has **slightly exceeded its interim target** that by 2021 students from the 20% most deprived background should represent at least 16% of new entrants to full-time first-degree courses, with **participation currently at 16.2%**.[148] By 2021, Scotland's ambition was that 10% of full-time first-degree entrants to individual Scottish universities should be from the 20% most deprived backgrounds. Full data is not yet available, but nearly three-quarters of universities (13 out of 18) had already achieved this by 2014/15. Achievement against these interim targets suggests that Scotland is set to achieve its longer-term ambition of 18% of students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds by 2026, and 20% by 2030, with equality of access in both colleges and universities.

England

Evidence suggests that some progress has also been made in achieving England's WP vision, in terms of the four long-term Key Performance Measures, which the OfS publishes, to reduce gaps in participation, continuation and attainment for specific groups of under-represented students. However, not all the measures have targets associated with them. For example, KPMs relating to the gap in participation rates between the most and least represented groups (based on POLAR4 Quintiles 1 and 5) have steadily reduced over the past 10 years, from 32.5 percentage points (pp) to 26.8pp but are not linked to a specific target.[149] Progress against the most recent targets for England still shows some considerable gaps, with data highlighting:

- the **smallest gap of 1.1 pp in 2020/21** between disabled and non-disabled student degree outcomes, with the aim of eliminating this by 2024/25;

- a **gap of 3.7 pp in 2019/20** in non-continuation rates between the most and least represented groups, with the aim of eliminating this gap by 2024/25, and to eliminate the absolute gap by 2030/31;

- a **large gap of 17.4 pp in 2020/21** for degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white and black students, with the aim of eliminating this unexplained gap by 2024/25, and to eliminate the absolute gap by 2030/31;

- a **substantial gap in entry rates of 18.5 pp in 2020/21** to higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups, with the aim of eliminating this gap by 2038/39.

---

[147] https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/

[148] Commissioner for Fair Access (2022). *Maintaining the Momentum Towards Fair Access*.

[149] Note that the participation rate is the proportion of potentially eligible entrants within each POLAR4 quintile that actually enter HE. In 21020/21 the participation rate of Q1 students was 33.0%, compared with 59.8% for Q5, hence a gap of 26.8pp. In contrast, data is also available on the proportion of entrants in each quintile. By this measure, Q1 represents 12.5% of all entrants and Q5 represents 30.1%, with a gap of 17.6pp.

Although England's targets are based on POLAR4, OfS also publishes a breakdown by Index of Multiple Deprivation. Interestingly, while the gap between POLAR4 Quintiles 1 and 5 is 17.6pp (Q1 = 12.5%, Q5 = 30.1%), the equivalent in terms of IMD is -3.5pp (Q1 = 23.2%, Q5 = 19.7%). This may relate to the limitations of these area-based measures and that POLAR and IMD are designed to measure different concepts.[150]

Wales

To achieve the Welsh Government's WP vision for WP, HEFCW set five broad targets, listed below. Where data is available, it suggests that progress has been made against each target to increase access and retention rates:

- The target to increase the proportion, by 11.8%, of all Welsh-domiciled students studying HE courses and FECs in Wales who are domiciled in the bottom quintile of wards in the WIMD or in Communities First (CF) cluster areas, has been met, with a **13.4% increase** being achieved from **17.8% in 2017/18 to 19.8% in 2019/20**.[151]

- The proportion of all UK-domiciled students studying HE courses at HEIs and FECs in Wales from UK low-participation areas was to increase from 33.2% in 2011/12 to 35.3% in 2015/16 (a rise of 6.3%). **Available data reports 15.8% for low-participation neighbourhoods in 2020/21, but this may be reporting on Q1 only, whereas Wales is targeting the bottom two.**[152]

- A decrease in the percentage of full-time undergraduate students no longer in HE following year of entry, from 9.2% in 2010/11 to 8.2% in 2015/16 (a drop of 10.7%). Progress against retention targets is mixed. The HEFCW national measures report suggests that the proportion of UK-domiciled full-time undergraduates who do not continue after the first year **increased from 8.1% in 2017/18 to 10.3% in 2019/20.**[151]

- A further retention target was to decrease the percentage of part-time degree students no longer in HE two years following year of entry, from 33.7% in 2011/12 to 30.1% in 2015/16 (a drop of 10.7%). **The proportion of UK-domiciled part-time undergraduates who do not continue after the first year decreased from 37.3% in 2017/18 to 31.9% in 2019/20.**[151]

- Progress in increasing the number of part-time students attending HE courses in Welsh HE institutions and FECs, to be equal to or greater than the comparable figure for the UK. **The figure for Wales shows a 21% uplift from 11,245 in 2019/20 to 13,605 in 2020/21.**[153] This is greater than the

---

[150] POLAR measures relative participation in HE at a particular baseline. IMD and NIMDM measure relative deprivation across various domains.

[151] HEFCW report (2019/20) on HE national measures.

[152] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/widening-participation

[153] https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Higher-Education/Students/Enrolments-at-Welsh-HEIs/enrolmentsduringtheyear-by-level-mode-year

UK, with an increase of 10.9% for undergraduate part-time 1st-year students from 126,890 in 2019/20 to 140,710 in 2020/21.

In summary, available data shows that Scotland, England and Wales have made progress towards their WP objectives to widen access and increase retention rates. Each country adopts a different approach to target setting. A review of the available evidence suggests that the Department may find it helpful to set interim as well as longer-term targets for WP at the national level. Individual HE providers' targets should then be aligned with these goals.

07. Monitoring and evaluation

This chapter sets out the processes for monitoring and evaluating WP in NI, how this compares with other jurisdictions in the UK, and the extent to which the vision for monitoring and evaluation outlined in *Access to Success*[154] has been realised.

Strategic objectives for monitoring and evaluation

Access to Success set out three key actions to strengthen monitoring processes: the first was a requirement for HE providers to monitor the attendance of students in receipt of WP support; the second was to review and improve the processes for gathering comprehensive and reliable data on WP activity across the sector; and the third was the introduction of annual Widening Access and Participation Plans (WAPP) for all fee-charging HE providers.

As noted in Chapter 1, WAPPs were introduced in 2013. Comprising four parts, WAPPs were designed to fulfil both regulatory and reporting purposes by detailing HE providers' strategic ambitions for WP and progress towards stated targets and milestones. Since 2006, all HE providers in NI have been required by the Education Student Fees (Approved Plans) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 to provide annual accounts of their WP spending and activity. This information has been collected in the WAPPs since they were introduced.

The vision for WP set out in *Access to Success* and the introduction of the WAPP process has been largely welcomed by HE providers. Since its launch, the strategy has supplied a framework for HE providers to set their own strategic priorities for WP. The introduction of WAPPs has provided the impetus to develop more effective systems and processes for monitoring activities and progress towards WP goals.

> *The strategy is a useful framework to have. It's useful to break down what you do into the categories within the WAPP document, so that you have baselines and benchmarks by which to judge your core activities.*
>
> — **HE-in-FE provider**

For some, particularly HE-in-FE providers, the strategy has had less influence on the direction of their WP activity, as WP was already central to their core mission:

> *[Widening Participation] is our bread and butter, we do this anyway. We don't do this because of a strategy from the Department, we do this because this is what the college is set up to do.*
>
> — **College provider**

---

154 *Access to Success*.

The introduction of the WAPP process is, therefore, perceived to have led to improvements in the strategic direction and monitoring of WP activity in some parts of the sector, and enhanced the volume of data available at the national and HE provider level. As such, the objectives, as set out in the national strategy, have been achieved.

There does, however, appear to be scope to further refine the WAPP process to reduce the burden on HE providers and enhance the information contained within them, in order to increase their value and usefulness. The consulted HE providers report that WAPPs are time-consuming to complete and do not reflect the full extent of their WP activity.

> *When you sit down to do a WAPP document, everybody finds paperwork a challenge, but it's the additional challenge of the format and the formatting on that document. No one looks forward to doing it, and actually we should be looking forward to doing it because it's showcasing such wonderful stuff.*
>
> — **HE-in-FE provider**

Furthermore, our analysis reveals a lack of consistency in the volume, type and format of the information supplied by HE providers across the sector. Consequently, there is consensus among HE providers that any new strategy for WP should include a commitment to redesign the WAPP process. Changes that would help to simplify and streamline the process and enhance the data produced include the development of a template which includes predefined categories for WP activities and target groups, and a requirement to provide a full breakdown of WP spending by type of activity and target group.

Evaluation of WP activity

Although no explicit objectives were set, *Access to Success* articulated an ambition to build evaluation capacity and develop an evidence base on effective WP practice in the NI context. Although the improvements in the monitoring data represent an important first step towards developing more robust approaches to evaluation, progress in achieving the ambition appears to be limited, and it is difficult to assess it accurately because of the varying level of information on evaluation that individual HE providers include in their WAPPs. Our analysis has identified pockets of research by HE providers, but more might exist. Furthermore, it is not clear from the information contained in the WAPPs which, if any, activities have been evaluated, and what types of evaluation were conducted. As a result, little is still known about the effectiveness and impact of the activities being delivered in NI.[155]

The report for the Equality Commission for NI[156] identified significant gaps in data relating to gender identity, political opinion, and sexual orientation. A lack of disaggregated data on ethnicity, disability status, marital status and dependency

---

[155] Robinson, D. & Salvestrini, V. (2020). *The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education: a review of the evidence*. Education Policy Institute.

[156] Burns, S. et al. (2015). *Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland*. Queen's University Belfast.

status was also highlighted. As noted earlier in this report, many of these characteristics are associated with gaps in attainment (at GCSE[157]) as well as progression to HE. Thus, more abundant and more granular data is needed to enable policy-makers and HE providers to fully understand how these characteristics intersect to shape and influence students' attitudes and intensions towards HE, so that interventions to widen access and improve their retention and success can be appropriately targeted and tailored according to need. This data, along with monitoring information on attendance at WP activities, is also required for robust analysis of the impact of interventions, including at the sub-group level. Measures to improve the volume and accessibility of national administrative data for the purposes of planning and evaluation are therefore required.

HE providers are asked to specify the expenditure associated with any research projects they carry out, to understand HE participation and improve practice at an institutional or regional level in their WAPP. The analysis suggests that the level of institutional expenditure on research has remained static in the period between the earliest and most recent WAPPs. Only Ulster University and Stranmillis University College increased the proportion of their additional fee income spent on research during that time (by 0.5% and 2.4% respectively). According to the most recent WAPPs, just three HE providers are currently undertaking research on WP.

The equivalent process to WAPPs in England is the Access and Participation Plan (APP). Like WAPPs, APPs set out how institutions will improve equality of opportunity for under-represented groups in HE.[158] Providers are required to outline their strategy, plans and goals for WP over a five-year period. Investment in WP activity must be broken down by interventions and life cycle stage; resources allocated to financial support, and to research and evaluation, must also be made explicit. Providers are also required to include a clearly articulated, robust and credible evaluation strategy to demonstrate the impact of their activity, together with how evaluation findings will inform future practice. NI's WAPPs would be strengthened by the inclusion of a requirement to set out how the effectiveness and impact of HE providers' WP activities will be measured, ideally against a common set of outcome indicators. Guidance on an appropriate level of expenditure for evaluation, given the volume and complexity of HE providers' WP activities, may also be required to ensure that evaluation is prioritised and resourced.

Given the synergy in the challenges and priorities for WP across the UK, there is considerable value in generating and sharing evidence of what works at different stages of the student lifecycle for different groups, as well as learning about the approaches that are less effective. However, despite the long-standing commitment to WP and significant level of investment, the volume and quality of the evidence on the impact of WP in the UK was, until recently, limited. To address this, as noted above, policy-makers and regulators are increasingly holding the HE sector to

---

[157] Early, E., Miller, S., & Dunne, L. (2021). *The influence of a pupil's socio-economic profile and school factors on GCSE attainment outcomes*. Administrative Data Research Centre Northern Ireland (ADRC NI).

[158] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/92d85140-2719-4af0-85c9-b28ee1038c5e/regulatory_notice_1_access_and_participation_plans.pdf

account for its WP work in the other jurisdictions, including by setting and monitoring national and institutional targets for WP, and requiring HE providers to submit evidence of the impact of their work. This evidence is being collated[159] so that it can be used by funders, WP practitioners and managers, and senior leaders to inform spending decisions (in order to deliver value money for key stakeholders), as well as for developing and delivering WP programmes and interventions that are effective for specific groups in specific contexts. HE providers in NI could make a valuable contribution to this evidence base in the future.

Some less research-intensive HE providers have limited in-house capacity for evaluation. Measures may therefore be required to develop the additional capacity needed for HE providers to measure and demonstrate the impact of their work. Training in evaluation for WP practitioners is part of the solution. Experience in England suggests that collaboration between HE providers on evaluation (in addition to delivery) is an effective way to build capacity. By working together, HE providers with limited resources can access specialist evaluation knowledge and skills (such as expertise in randomised control trials and quasi-experimental methods) that are only likely to be available in more research-intensive institutions. Collaboration can also help to overcome challenges that are often encountered when seeking to establish the impact of WP interventions, such as ensuring the validity of self-reported data, collecting meaningful data from younger learners, disentangling the unique contribution of individual interventions, and understanding the impact of activities in the long term.[160]

---

[159] See, for example: https://www.fairaccess.scot/the-toolkit/ and https://taso.org.uk/evidence/toolkit/

[160] Harrison, N., Vigurs, K., Crockford, J. & McCaig, C. (2018). *Understanding the evaluation of access and participation outreach interventions for under 16 year olds*. Sheffield Hallam University.

08. Conclusions and recommendations

In this final chapter, we summarise the progress that has been made towards achieving the vision set out in *Access to Success*, while taking account of key changes in the HE landscape. Seven strategic priorities for a future approach to WP in NI are identified, informed by evidence and insights from this research.

The evolving HE landscape

The UK HE landscape has evolved over the 10 years since *Access to Success* was launched. These changes have the potential to impact on students' intentions towards HE, their choice of course, mode of study, and type and geographical location of HE provider, as well as demand for financial support; these outcomes in turn have implications for the strategic priorities set out in *Access to Success*. Key changes in this period include:

- **Differential fees across the UK.** In 2006, the NI Executive introduced HE tuition fees of £3,000 for full-time, first degree, NI-domiciled students. By 2021/22 this had increased to up to £4,530. Tuition fees along with changes to financial support were introduced in the other home nations at a similar time. NI-domiciled students who choose to study elsewhere in the UK can now expect to pay a fee of up to £9,250 per year. Students who are normally domiciled in England and Wales are expected to pay a fee of up to £9,250[161] per year irrespective of where they study in the UK. While students who normally live in Scotland but study HE elsewhere in the UK can also expect to pay the £9,250 fee, those who remain in Scotland to study pay no fees.[162]

- **Student number control policies.** Student recruitment in NI is limited by the Maximum Student Number (MaSN), introduced by the UK government in 1998. The cap has remained at 24,000–25,000 students for nearly a decade.[163] Student number controls were also in place in England, until they were relaxed and eventually abolished in 2015/16.[164] The lack of a cap on students entering HE in NI from other parts of the UK, or on those entering HE providers in GB, has increased competition for places in NI for NI-domiciled students, while at the same time making it easier for NI-domiciled students to gain a place at a HE provider in GB, albeit at a higher fee.[165]

- **The introduction of Higher Level Apprenticeships (HLA).** HLAs were introduced in FE colleges in 2017/18 (at Level 4/5) and at HEIs (at Level 6/7)

---

[161] The maximum fee payable for any UK student studying in Wales is £9,000 per year.
[162] See summary table at: https://www.ucas.com/finance/undergraduate-tuition-fees-and-student-loans#how-much-are-tuition-fees
[163] PIVOTAL Public Policy Forum NI (2021). *Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland*.
[164] The abolition of student number controls was announced in the Chancellor's autumn statement 2013: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/autumn-statement-2013-documents
[165] The PIVOTAL (2021) research found that that as the number of available places for NI-domiciled applicants at local universities decreases, the number who access a university in GB that is not their first choice increases.

in 2018/19. Although it is possible to study a HLA at the equivalent of Master's level (Level 7), most are at Level 5 (Foundation Degree or equivalent).[166] HLAs are offered by HEIs and colleges delivering HE-in-FE and take a minimum of two years to complete. The employer carries the cost of the students' wages whilst attending college. The tuition fee is met by the Department, making HLAs an attractive alternative to traditional degree programmes.

Progress towards achieving the vision

Based on our analysis of the available evidence and insight for this research, we find that the key actions set out in *Access to Success* have been at least partially met at the national level (Table 6).

Table 6: Performance against key actions in *Access to Success*.

Key actions	Progress
1: Longitudinal study of educational attainment to identify patterns of disadvantage when applying to HE	Ongoing
2: Review of data pertaining to access to and participation in HE	Met
3: Identification of WP students based on multiple disadvantages and including an assessment of individual needs	Partially met
4: Single integrated regional awareness-raising programme	Met
5: Expansion of aspiration- and attainment-raising programmes at school, college, community and the workplace	Partially met
6: Increased enrolments in Foundation Degrees	Met
7: Encouragement of regional programmes for a standardised route of exceptional application to HE	Partially met
8: Attendance monitoring of all students in receipt of WP support	Met
9: HE institutions to develop additional support measures for students to sustain continuing participation	Partially met
10: Philanthropic bursary/scholarship programmes	Partially met
11: Introduction of Widening Access and Participation Plan	Met

[166] A Higher Level Apprenticeship Pilot Programme in Northern Ireland was undertaken in academic years 2015/16 and 2016/17: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/higher-level-apprenticeship-pilot-activity-northern-ireland-201516-201617

Widening access to HE – Key actions 1 to 7

Progress towards Key action 1 is ongoing. Secondary data is now used by the Department to identify fluctuations in applications and acceptances to HE (Key action 2). Data is also now used to identify patterns of disadvantage, to ensure activity is directed at core target groups in NI. However, it has not been possible to identify the extent to which individual needs are being routinely assessed (Key action 3). The research highlights that more needs to be done to target and tailor interventions to the needs of those groups that remain under-represented in HE in NI. This should, therefore, remain a strategic priority.

'Reach Higher' was successfully delivered between 2013 and 2016 to promote the benefits of HE (Key action 4). NI HE providers have expanded their WP offer to include academic support programmes to raise aspirations and attainment. However, outreach activities are predominantly focussed on primary and post-primary schools. There is limited evidence that these interventions are also being delivered to adults, including those in the workplace (Key action 5). This should be addressed in a future approach to WP.

Expanding pathways into HE was identified as a priority in the strategy, including a commitment to increase the number of enrolments in Foundation Degrees. The target was exceeded in advance of the milestone set (Key action 6). Additional objectives to increase awareness and the benefits of Foundation Degrees have also been achieved.

Although contextual admissions are still in their infancy, the Pathway Opportunity Programme has been successfully implemented by Queen's University Belfast since 2017. There is, however, no further evidence that "a standardised route of exceptional application to HE" has been implemented in NI (Key action 7). Whether it is valuable to pursue this objective in future is debatable, given that contextual offers are mainly appropriate for high-tariff institutions such as Queen's.

Retention in HE – Key action 9

The objective to improve retention and reduce non-continuation among under-represented groups has been partially achieved. Most HE providers have increased their volume of activity to enhance retention and are outperforming their benchmarks. However, more needs to be done to reduce non-continuation among part-time students and those from MDM Quintile 1. This should provide the focus for a future approach to WP.

There are no explicit actions in the strategy to enhance progression to successful outcomes for under-represented groups, and the volume of activity targeted at this stage in the lifecycle has remained static. Addressing gaps in outcomes should also inform a future approach to WP.

Financial support – Key action 10

HE providers offer a range of financial support, including bursaries, scholarships and grants. Some also provide specialist advice and support on financial issues. However, it is not clear from the evidence whether any of the funding for this financial support is derived from philanthropic sources.

Monitoring and evaluation – Key actions 8 and 11

WAPPs have been successfully implemented (Key action 11), and systems are now in place to monitor the attendance of students in receipt of WP support (Key action 8). There was no explicit action in the strategy relating to evaluation, although the Department set out an ambition to build capacity and enhance the evidence base on 'what works' in WP. While some HE providers are conducting research in a WP context, there is limited evidence that impact is being robustly evaluated. A future approach to WP should include a specific action on evaluation.

Towards developing a future approach

NI has a good record in WP in HE compared with the other UK nations, and progress has been made towards achieving the vision set out in *Access to Success*. Ten years on, it is timely to revisit this vision and develop an approach that takes account of this progress and recent changes in the HE and wider policy landscape, to ensure it is fit for the future.

The barriers faced by under-represented groups remain largely unchanged. Low attainment, issues of rurality and the availability of the full range of HE provision present specific challenges in NI. Although some of the gaps in access and participation in HE have narrowed, certain groups remain under-represented (particularly MDM Quintile 1 Protestant males), and some (particularly part-time students and those with a disability) do not achieve the same outcomes from HE as their more advantaged peers.

A wide range of WP activities and interventions that are proven to be effective are delivered by HE providers across NI. However, they are not sufficiently targeted and tailored to meet the needs of these specific sub-groups. Furthermore, there is limited evidence on the impact of WP in the NI context, to inform spending decisions and the development of effective interventions to address "stubborn pockets of under-representation".

Drawing on insights from this research, we have identified seven strategic priorities to inform a future approach to WP in NI:

1) **Take account of the intersections between student characteristics to identify priority target groups for WP**, and to ensure that interventions address the specific barriers to HE experienced by these groups, including low prior attainment. Addressing gaps in national administrative data should be a key priority to facilitate this process.

2) **Set national targets** to address under-representation of identified priority groups. Develop associated key performance indicators against which progress towards the long-term goals can be measured at a national and provider level.

3) **Require HE providers to set more ambitious targets** to address gaps in access, retention and progression, in relation to national key performance indicators. Consider mechanisms to encourage HE providers to work collaboratively to address 'cold spots' in WP provision and reduce duplication.

4) **Consider a revised WAPP process focused on outcomes rather than being inputs based.** Monitor progress by capturing consistent and comprehensive data from all HE providers about the number and characteristics of participants in WP, the specific types of activities delivered at each stage in the lifecycle, and the associated expenditure. Consider the benefits of receiving WAPP submissions on a three- or five-year cycle with risk-based monitoring to reduce the burden.

5) **Develop a more robust evidence base on 'what works' in a NI context.** Consider devising a common set of outcome measures to assess the impact of WP activities and interventions at both a national and local level. Build evaluation capacity through training and collaboration between HE providers, and ensure that HE providers allocate an appropriate proportion of their WP budgets to research and evaluation. Require HE providers to submit evidence about the impact of their work through the annual WAPP monitoring process.

6) **Increase access to HE in rural areas and the range of courses available in NI**, to reduce migration amongst 'reluctant' and 'determined' leavers and retain more graduate talent with higher-level skills, in support of wider skills policy objectives.

7) **Establish a collaborative forum** to achieve economies of scale, maximise value for money, minimise duplication and to better co-ordinate WP activities across all relevant stakeholders, including HE providers, government departments and bodies representing WP target groups.

Appendix 1: Survey respondent demographics

Student survey

After data-cleaning, there are 203 valid responses to the student survey. Respondents did not answer every question, so in the following analysis the totals vary.

What type of school do you attend?

	Frequency	Per cent
High school	174	87.9
Grammar school	23	11.6
High school grammar stream	1	0.5
Total	198	100

Do you have a disability, learning difficulty or long-term physical or mental health condition?

	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	21	12.7
No	127	76.5
Prefer not to say	18	10.8
Total	166	100

What is your gender?

	Frequency	Per cent
Female	106	63.9
Male	51	30.7
Other	4	2.4
Prefer not to say	5	3
Total	166	100

Which of the following ethnic groups do you belong to?

	Frequency	Per cent
White – British	19	11.5
White – Irish	120	72.7
White – Scottish	1	0.6
Other white background	11	6.7
Black or Black British – African	2	1.2
Mixed white and Black Caribbean	1	0.6
Asian or Asian British – Indian	1	0.6
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani	1	0.6
Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi	1	0.6

	Frequency	Per cent
Other Asian background	2	1.2
Mixed white and Asian	1	0.6
Arab	1	0.6
Gypsy or Traveller	1	0.6
Any other mixed background	2	1.2
Prefer not to say	1	0.6
Total	165	100

What is your religion?

	Frequency	Per cent
Christian Catholic	119	72.1
Christian Protestant	7	4.2
Other Christian denomination	1	0.6
Hindu	1	0.6
Muslim	4	2.4
Jewish	1	0.6
No Religion	23	13.9
Any other religion	2	1.2
Prefer not to say	7	4.2
Total	165	100

Are you/have you been eligible for Free School Meals at any time in the last six years?

	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	84	50.6
No	74	44.6
Don't know	4	2.4
Prefer not to say	4	2.4
Total	166	100

Are you currently in care, or previously been in care?

	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	3	1.8
No	156	94.5
Don't know	2	1.2
Prefer not to say	4	2.4
Total	165	100

Are you a young carer of a family member?

	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	6	3.7
No	148	90.2
Don't know	6	3.7

	Frequency	Per cent
Prefer not to say	4	2.4
Total	164	100

MDM Quintile (1 is most deprived)

	Frequency	Per cent
1	17	13.3
2	15	11.7
3	14	10.9
4	26	20.3
5	24	18.8
6	15	11.7
7	4	3.1
8	9	7
9	2	1.6
10	2	1.6
Total	128	100

Teacher Survey

After data-cleaning, there are 53 valid responses to the teacher survey.

Which of the following do you work at?

	Frequency	Per cent
High school	43	81.1
Grammar school	1	1.9
College	9	17
Total	53	100

What is your current position?

	Frequency	Per cent
Headteacher/Principal	4	7.5
Deputy Headteacher/Principal	4	7.5
Head of Year	5	9.4
Head of Department	14	26.4
Subject Leader	1	1.9
Classroom teacher	17	32.1
Teaching assistant	1	1.9
Other teaching role (please specify)	3	5.7
Other non-teaching role (please specify)	4	7.5
Total	53	100

What types of qualifications do you teach, or did you teach in a previous teaching role?

	Frequency	Per cent
Academic (e.g. A-Levels)	33	80.5
Technical or Vocational (e.g. BTEC, NVQs, T-Levels)	18	43.9
I have never been in a teaching role	5	12.2
Total	53	100

How long have you worked in a school or college setting?

	Frequency	Per cent
Less than 5 years	8	20
6–10 years	6	15
More than 10 years	26	65
Total	40	100

Which age group are you in?

	Frequency	Per cent
Under 25	1	2.4
25–29	6	14.6
30–39	13	31.7
40–49	8	19.5
50–59	10	24.4
60 or over	2	4.9
I prefer not to say	1	2.4
Total	41	100

Appendix 2: Characteristics of students interviewed

Fifteen qualitative interviews were undertaken with WP respondents who had completed the student survey. The respondents were drawn from a sampling frame of 79 students who had completed a full questionnaire and agreed to be contacted for future research. The sampling frame consisted of respondents from only 10 schools and colleges, and the results of the in-depth interviews need to be interpreted in this context, while considering the extent to which these 10 schools/colleges are representative of the schools and colleges that were invited to participate in the survey, and of all the schools/colleges with sixth forms in NI. There is no Protestant representation in the qualitative research, either by school affiliation or the respondents' own religious affiliation. The profile of the 15 interviewees is as follows:

- Attend a High School (13), attend a Grammar School (2)
- Religion: Catholic (8), No Religion (4), Other (1), Prefer Not to Say (2)
- Applied to HE: Yes (9), No (5), not answered (1)
- Female (12), Male (2), Other (1)
- Year 13 (6), Year 14 (9)

All 15 respondents had a WP profile, including at least one WP marker from the following criteria:

- Doesn't know anyone in their family, social circle or neighbourhood with HE experience;
- First in their immediate family to go to HE;
- No parental experience of HE – siblings went first;
- Home postcode in the first or second most deprived quintiles, as measured by the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures;
- In receipt of free school meals at any point during their secondary education;
- Self-reported disability;
- Young carer;
- Care experienced;
- From a minority ethnic group or migrant group, i.e. not white Irish or white British;
- Identifies as other than male or female;
- Has attended or been accepted for a WP summer school programme.

The average number of WP markers per respondent was 2.7.

Fourteen respondents had applied or were intending to apply to HE, and one respondent had applied for a higher apprenticeship, mostly due to financial barriers to accessing HE.

There may be some additional bias in the final group who were interviewed: in particular, there was a higher refusal rate or non-contact rate from those not intending to go to university compared to those who intended to go, despite the interview being introduced as an exploration of post-18 choices. Furthermore, there were nine missed appointments. Those who did attend their interviews were confident, content with their future choices, and included several students those who planned to study law, medicine, accountancy, and/or study at prestigious universities; this possibly indicates a sampling bias towards more successful and confident candidates.

Appendix 3: Characteristics of wider stakeholders interviewed

Interviews were undertaken with the following HE providers and stakeholders:

- Belfast Metropolitan College
- Queen's University Belfast
- St Mary's University
- Stranmillis University College
- Ulster University
- North West Regional College
- Northern Regional College
- Open University
- Southern Regional College
- South Eastern Regional College
- South West College
- College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise
- Department for the Economy
- Department for Communities
- National Union of Students
- Stirling University
- Voice of Young People in Care

Appendix 4: Trends in HE participation

Figure 11: Applicants to NI HE providers by domicile, 2006/07 to 2016/17. (N.B. Where RoI data is not given separately, it is counted in 'EU'; 'Other EU' excludes RoI.)

Data source: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/ucas-applications
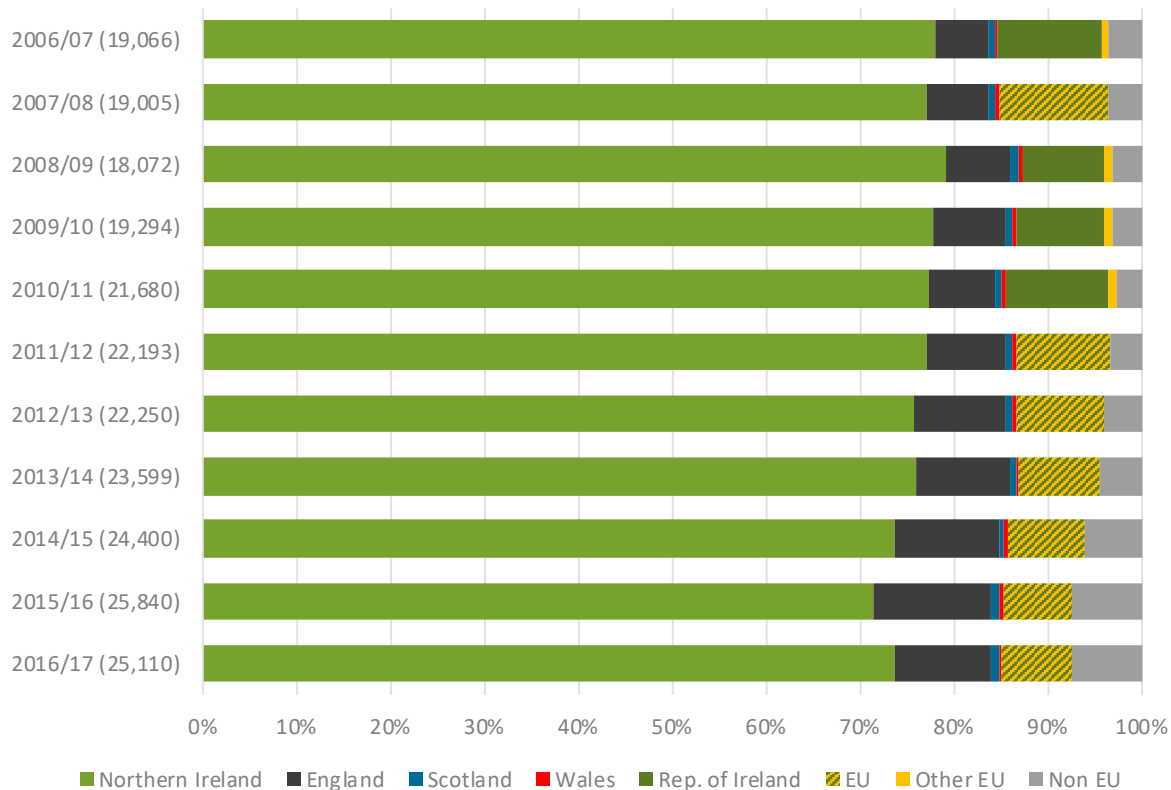
Figure 12: Acceptance rate (acceptances/applications) of NI-domiciled applicants applying and applicants accepted to UK institutions through UCAS – 2011/12 to 2020/21.[167]
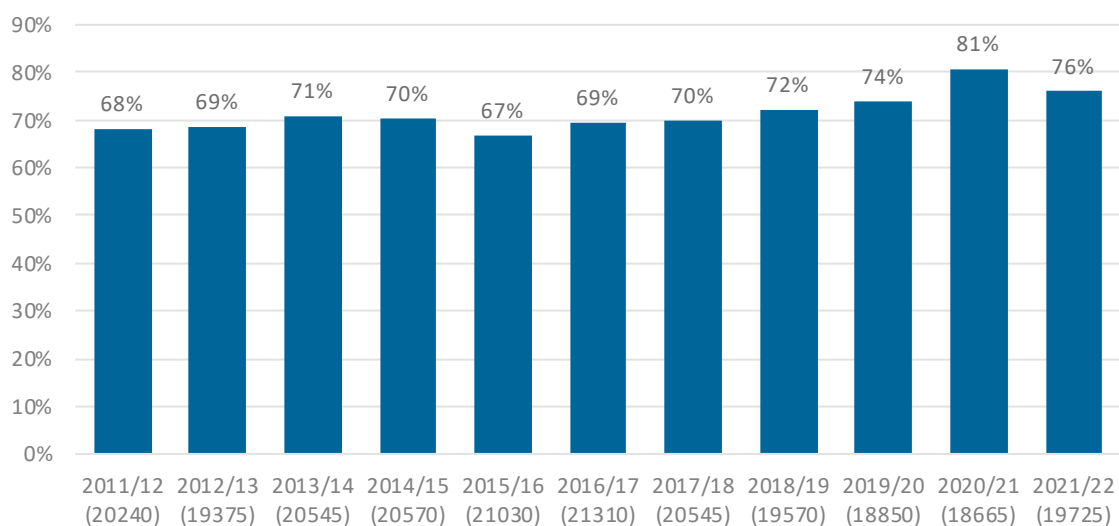
Figures in brackets are the number of applications by academic year

Data source: https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021

Figure 13: HE enrolments by NI-domiciled students at NI HEIs (including Open University) and FECs, 2010/11 to 2019/20.

---
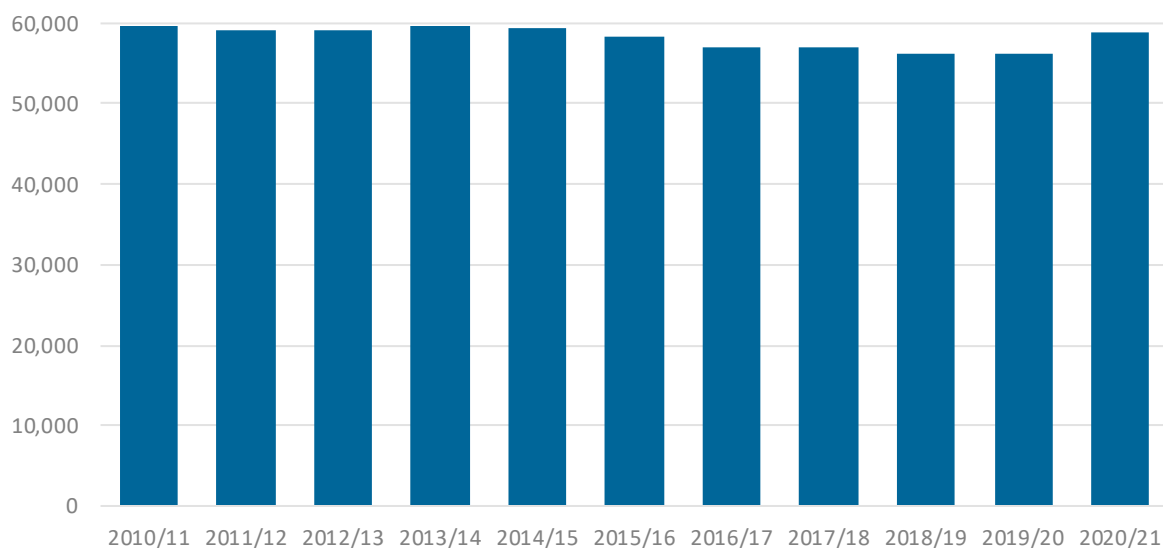
[167] Figures include applicants applying and accepted to Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University, Stranmillis University College, and the NI Colleges of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). St. Mary's University College and the Open University do not use UCAS for their application process.

Figure 14: HE-in-FE enrolments by age and year.
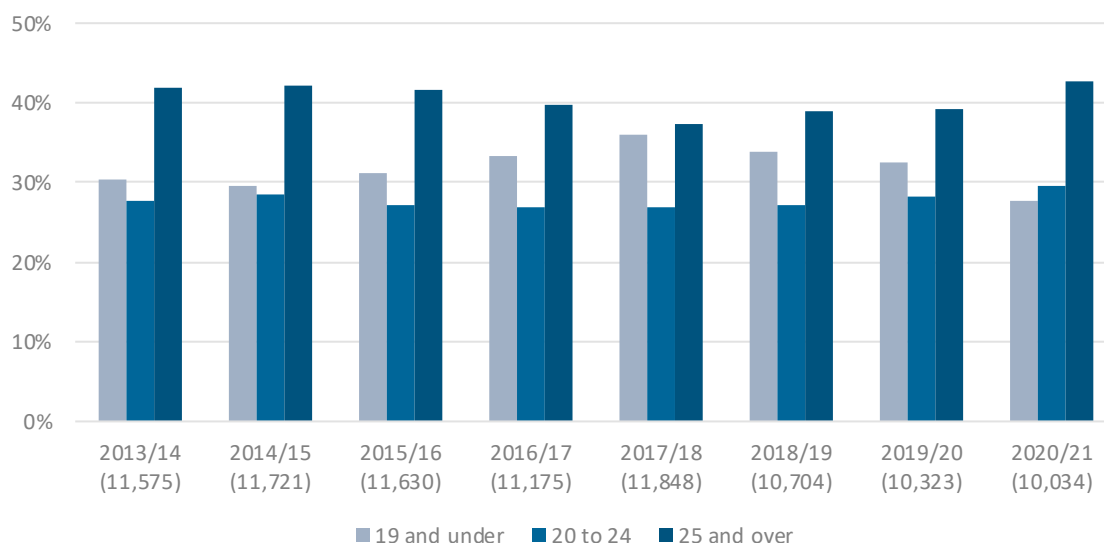
Figure 15: Enrolments of undergraduates at NI HEIs by age and year.
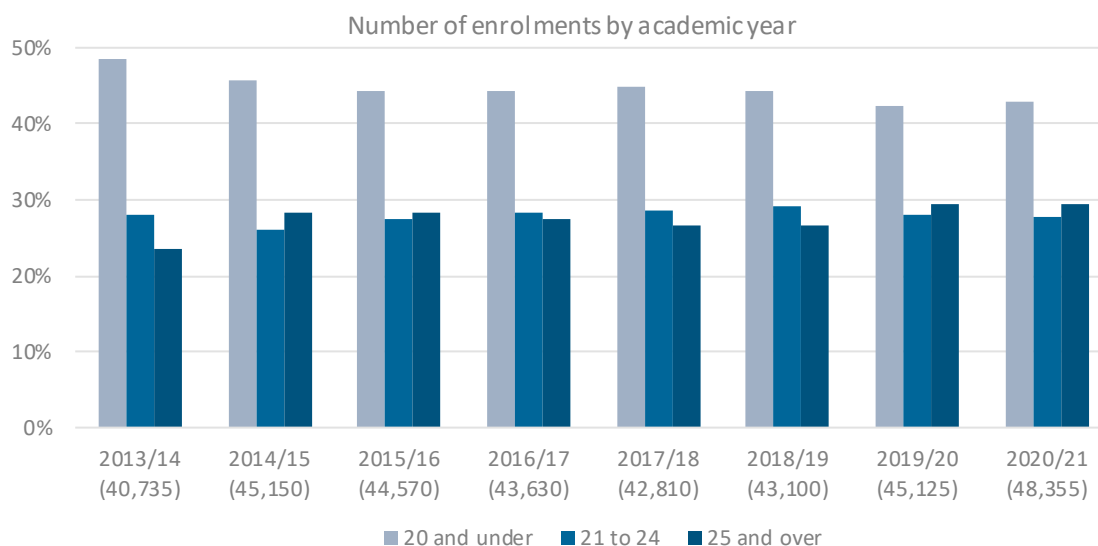
**Figure 16: Final year enrolment non-retention rates for HE-in-FE at NI FECs, with seven-year average (%) by year.**
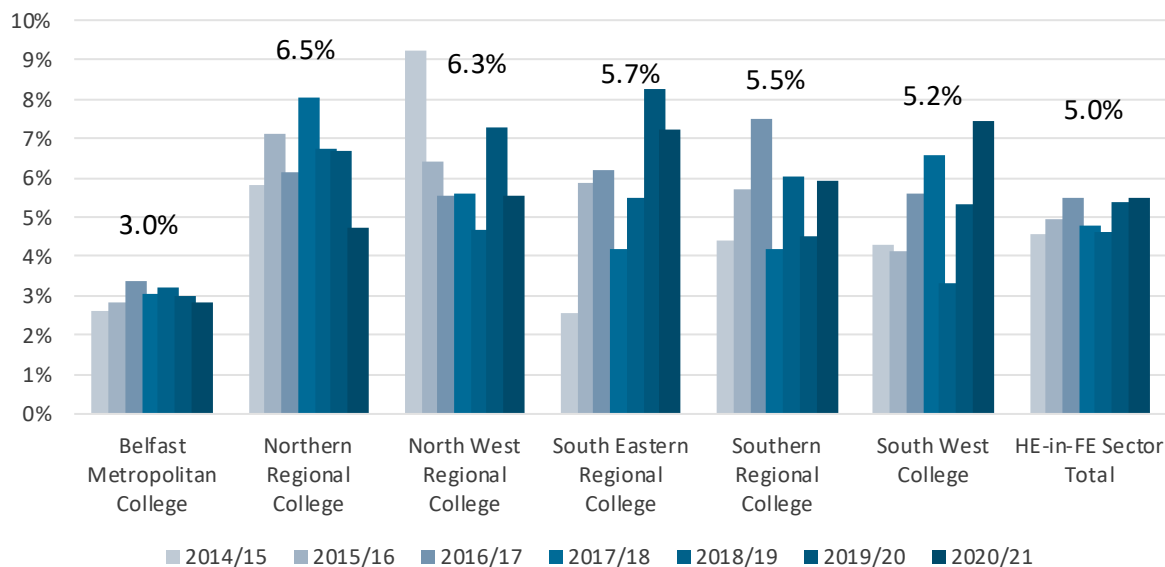
Figure 17: Comparison of non-continuation rate benchmarks for full-time first-degree entrants to NI HEIs, by institution (percentage point difference between target and actual). N.B. The Open University (NI) is excluded because it has no full-time students.
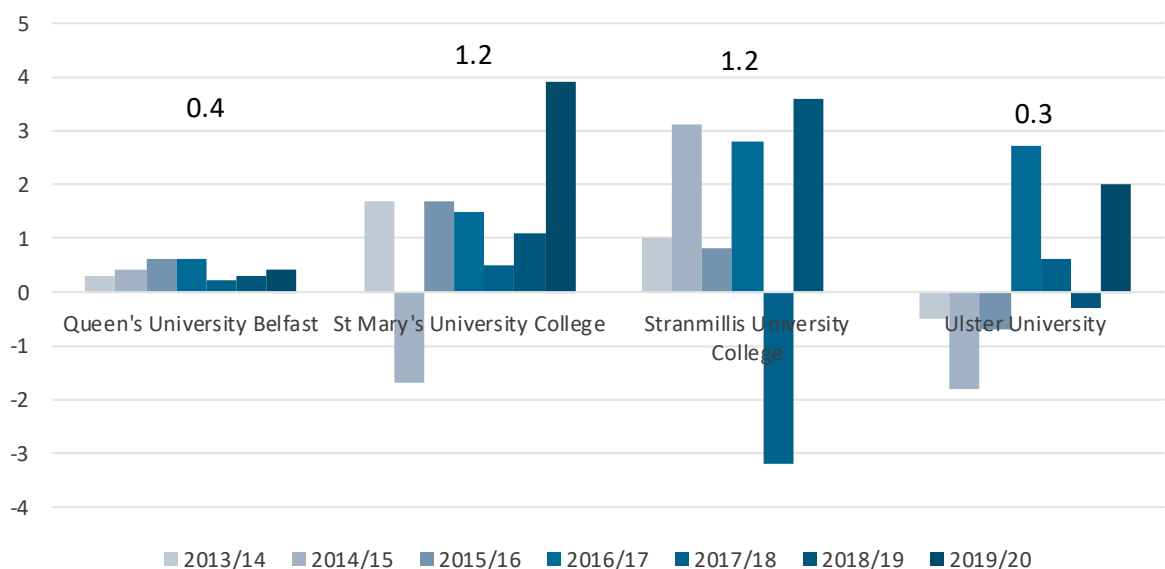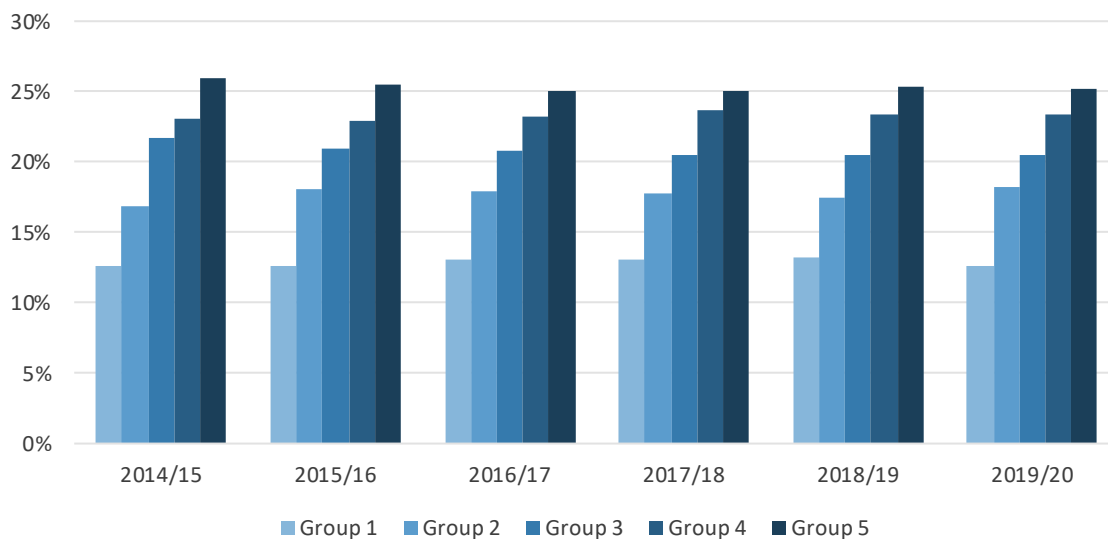
Figure 18: Comparison of non-continuation benchmarks for part-time first-degree entrants to NI HEIs, by institution (percentage point difference between target and actual). N.B. St Mary's University College is excluded because it has no part-time students.
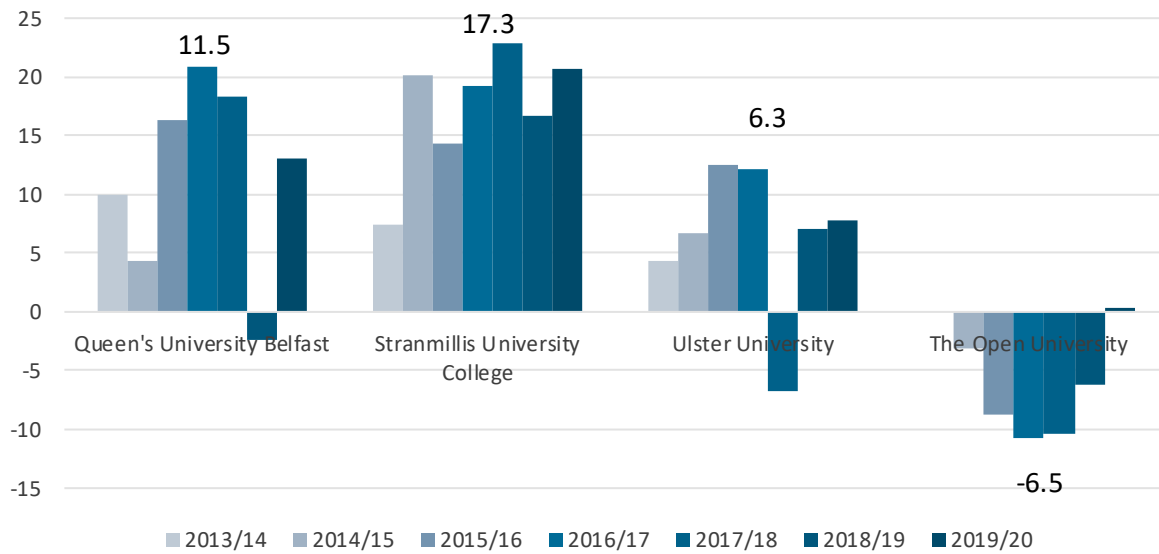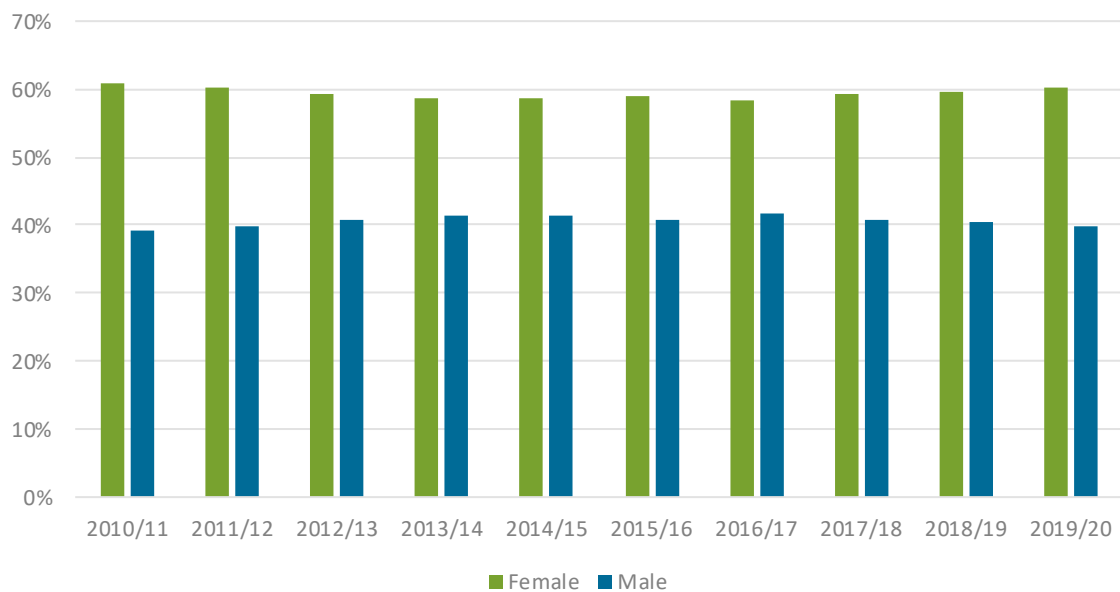

Data source: WAPPs.

Figure 19: NI-domiciled students gaining HE qualifications, by MDM quintile.

Figure 20: Qualifications gained by NI-domiciled students by gender

Data source: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/higher-education-qualifications